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DEAD MEN'S SHOES

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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DEAD MEN'S SHOES.

CHAPTER I.

TROT'S HISTORY.

ALEXIS wakes next morning with a throbbing head and a vague sense of trouble and regret; but upon the one question of his immediate return to the Grange his mind is fixed. There shall be no further delay. He has been long enough at Dorley—perhaps too long for his peace.

'If any one had told me last Christmas that my heart could ever beat one throb in the minute faster for any woman living except my wife, I should have given him the lie boldly enough. Is it gratitude—respect—affection—that makes me think so much of

my fair young nurse, and think it so hard a thing to part from her? Or is it a feeling that I am bound to stifle? I hardly know how to answer that question even to myself. At worst the sentiment is a mild one. Passion has no part in my love—if love it be. It is pure and reverent, and I will say no word that shall sully it. Yet I can but feel what new brightness might glorify my life if I were free to love this girl.'

He rises later than usual, and not before Trot has come to knock at his door and announce the hour.

'Bekkust is weady for oo,' says Trot; 'oo eggs is boiled. Trot found 'em in the henhouse; Cothin Thina ones.'

'Dear little Trot! How I shall miss that baby voice, and those pretty baby ways!' thinks Alexis. 'Coming presently, Trot,' he cries cheerily, and Trot makes his way downstairs rather noisily, as he alights upon every stair with a jump.

It is noon when Alexis goes down to breakfast, a radiant summer noon, and the first strawberries from the garden are upon the table, nestling among their

aristocratic leaves. Linda is seated in her accustomed place by the window, her inexhaustible work-basket by her side. When she is not working for her grandfather or Trot she is making clothes for the poorest among her neighbours.

'You accused me of looking ill last night, Miss Challice,' says Alexis as they shake hands; 'and this morning I find you as pale as your lilies out yonder. What has happened to disturb you?'

'I have been told what you did yesterday evening,' answers Linda, gravely.

'What, my little escapade with one of your amiable neighbours,' cries Alexis, lightly. 'You don't mean to say people have been talking of such a trifle as that? I think I taught the gentleman that it's bad manners to laugh at a sick man.'

'Was it for laughing at you that you struck him, Mr. Secretan?' asks Linda.

'Certainly. My cadaverous looks provoked his mirth, and if I do resemble the Knight of the Rueful Countenance, I don't choose to be laughed at before my face.'

'Oh, Mr. Secretan, I know all that was said by

that man. Elizabeth has been in the village this morning, and people have told her all that happened. It was the slander against me which you resented. The old cruel slander which has pursued me ever since I took pity upon that desolate child.'

The tears roll slowly down her cheeks, but she wipes them hastily away and regains composure. She is not one of those women who wash out their grief in tears.

'No one shall slander you in my presence, Miss Challice, and go unpunished. I'm sorry I let that foul-mouthed ruffian off so easily.'

'And you do not believe —— you ——' Her voice fails her, and again the unbidden tears start to her eyes.'

'I believe anything against you? No, Linda. But if you would trust me with your secret——'

'I have no secret,' replies Linda, with a frank, steady look, more convincing than a world of protestation. 'I have shrunk from talking to you of that dear little fellow's history only because it is a very sad one, and because the scandal which he has brought upon us has made the subject particularly

painful to me. I should have been weak and cowardly if I had consented to part with my little darling just because people are wicked enough to speak evil of me, but I am not so brave as to endure their slander without pain. I have suffered deeply.'

'Tell me all, I entreat you. I think I love that child almost as well as you do. He is about the age my own son would have been had he lived—the son I never saw. That sounds curious, does it not? but the history of my marriage is a very painful one, Miss Challice, though I thank God it has no element of disgrace—and I——' here he falters a little, as if the words he has to speak were somewhat difficult to say—'I still have the hope of reunion with my wife.'

He may have some motive for speaking of Sibyl to-day, though she has been very little in his thoughts of late.

'Tell me all about Trot's birth.'

'Let me see you begin your breakfast first. It's rather a long story.'

'I am all attention.'

'It was about the end of March, three years

ago, when I first saw Trot. It was a bleak afternoon, windy and cold. I had gone out into the front garden to look for the first wall-flowers, when I saw a woman leaning against the railings for support. I did not see at first that she had a baby in her arms, it was so hidden by an old sealskin jacket. I asked her if she was ill, and she said yes, she was ill and tired. She had walked all the way from Winchester. I asked her to come into the porch and rest. She came in, and had hardly seated herself when she fainted, and would have fallen if I had not managed to support her in my arms. Then the baby began to cry, and I saw him for the first time—such a tiny thing. Fortunately I was accustomed to young babies, from having visited a good deal among our cottagers.

'And you took them in, mother and child, and sheltered and nourished them?'

'What else could I do? Elizabeth and I soon discovered that the poor creature was starving. She had been living on penny rolls for the last fortnight—ever since she had left the workhouse, where her baby was born. Yes, that sounds dread-

ful, doesn't it? Our darling Trot was born in Winchester Union.'

'Dreadful indeed from society's point of view. What kind of person was the mother?'

'I can hardly tell you. She was very ill when we took her in—worn and wasted to a mere shadow. She must have been very pretty when she was happy and well, but her beauty was all gone. She was very reserved, and though I tried to win her confidence, she would tell me nothing about herself—what she had been in the past, or what she hoped to be in the future. She seemed very unhappy, and though she was evidently fond of her baby, he seemed rather to add to her unhappiness. I felt that her story must be a very sorrowful one.'

'And you pitied her?'

'With all my heart. One day when she had been with us about a week, and was beginning to get a little better and stronger, I asked her if she had any home to go to. She had been talking about leaving us in a day or two. Yes, she said, she had a home, and she was going to it, but she

did not know what to do with her baby. There were reasons why she could not take the baby home. And then she asked me if I knew any honest woman in the village who would take care of the child for a year or two, and trust to her sending payment for its maintenance regularly after her return home. I told her that I was afraid none of our own villagers would take the responsibility of a stranger's child. They would want to know who and what she was before they trusted her. Of course I said this as kindly as I could.'

'As if you could be anything but kind!' exclaims Alexis.

'After this I could see she was very much disturbed in her mind. She sat with the baby in her lap, crying over it in a fretful way, and she was evidently in great trouble, and chiefly about the baby. I don't know how it was, but just then there came into my mind the thought of all I had ever heard about wretched women killing their children. I thought of this poor creature wandering about the country penniless, friendless, with a wailing infant in her arms, and how in some

dreadful hour wandering by the side of a river, the temptation might come to her to drown this sweet, innocent little thing, which, even in its unconsciousness, seemed to cling to me, and to be happier in my arms than in its mother's.'

'Doubtless infants, like the lower animals, have an instinct that tells them when they are beloved,' remarks Alexis.

'"If my grandfather would only let me keep your child!" I said, at which she burst into tears again, and threw her arms round my neck, and entreated me to take care of the little one, and promised me all kinds of rewards by-and-bye, when fortune smiled upon her. I told her I wanted no reward except the delight of making the little fellow happy, and teaching him to love me. I thought very little of the responsibility I was assuming, I am afraid. It seemed scarcely more to me than if I was offering to take care of another kitten to add to our family of pets.'

'What did your grandfather say to the idea?'

'Bless his kind heart, he never refused me anything in his life. He was rather against the notion

at first, and he asked me if I had considered what a burden we should be taking upon ourselves, and what we were to do with the baby when it grew up. "A baby's easy to keep;" he said; "a quart of new milk more or less won't hurt us, but what shall we do when he's a big fellow and wants schooling?" "He can go to the mill and work for his living," I said. "Not if you bring him up as a pet and plaything," said grandfather, "he'll be too good for the mill."'

'And you had your way?'

'Yes; I couldn't get that idea about the river out of my mind, and I was determined the unhappy mother shouldn't take the baby away, so I talked my dear old grandfather into giving his consent, and he promised to adopt the child. The poor creature went down on her knees to me when I told her that I would take care of her baby, but she was not any more inclined to confide in me than she had been at the very first; and two days afterwards she insisted upon leaving us, though I begged her to stay till she was stronger and better able to travel. She was resolute, so I gave her a couple of sove-

reigns, all the money I had of my own, and patched up her clothes a little. She was dreadfully shabby, poor thing, and at daybreak one morning she left us to walk to Winchester, where she was to take the parliamentary train to London.'

'You are sure she was going to London?'

'That is what she told me, and she was anxious to get to Winchester in time for the London train.'

'She did not even tell you her name?'

'No. "I might give you a false name," she said, "but what would be the use of that? If I live, and things prosper with me, you shall know all about me some day."'

'That was vague,' says Alexis. 'Did she wear a wedding ring?'

'Yes, but she told me that it was one she had bought for a penny. "I sold the real one to buy bread," she said.'

'And she left her child without showing any grief?'

'No, just at the last she broke down, clasped him to her breast, and cried over him bitterly.'

'Have you heard nothing of her since that time?'

'I have had no actual communication. But I have received three ten-pound notes at intervals each in a blank envelope, posted in London. I have put the money into the savings bank for my darling.'

'And the envelopes, you kept them, I suppose?'

'No, they were directed in a cramped unformed hand, like that of a very common person. I cannot think that it was the writing of Trot's mother, yet I feel sure the money must have come from her.'

'There was nothing written inside the envelope?'

'Not a word. The bank note was wrapped in a blank sheet of paper.'

'Provoking!' exclaims Alexis. 'I would give a great deal to know more about Trot's origin. His name of Trot, by the way, how did he come by that?'

'It is only a pet name which my grandfather gave him when he first began to walk and was always trotting about the house. He was christened

William after my grandfather, who stood for him. We had him christened the week after his mother left us.'

'Poor little Trot, but for you he might have been left outside the fold. Poor little Trot, born in a workhouse, abandoned by his mother, fatherless, nameless! Well, Miss Challice, his schooling shall never trouble you or your grandfather. We'll send him to Winchester when he's old enough, and to Oxford after, and make a man of him. That shall be my duty, and it may be some small return for all the care you and your worthy grandfather have bestowed upon me.'

'You are too good. Believe me, we need no recompence.'

'No more did the good Samaritan. How long is it, by the way, since you received the last bank note?'

'Not more than two months ago. It came while you were very ill.'

'I thank you most sincerely for having told me this story. I am deeply interested in Trot, deeply moved by your goodness to him. It is a hard thing

that such an act of divine charity should have brought sorrow upon you. It makes me detest your innocent rustics.'

'Do not blame them. It arises out of their ignorance——'

'No,' cries Alexis sternly, 'it arises out of their knowledge of evil, and incapacity to believe in good.'

CHAPTER II.

GAINING TIME.

NOT long does Mr. Pilgrim content himself with undeclared and silent homage. The day comes, too soon for Sibyl, when he opens the floodgates of his passion. He is a very different wooer from the honest-minded English gentleman, Sir Wilford Cardonnel, and Sibyl finds her position more painful than it has ever been yet.

He follows her into the garden one June evening after dinner, when twilight is creeping over Redcastle, purpling the foliage in Sir John Boldero's park, and spreading a faint gray shadow over the brilliant flower-beds on Mr. Trenchard's lawn.

'Why always avoid me?' asks Joel tenderly, as Sibyl quickens her pace at his coming.

'I think the reason is obvious,' she says.

She has constrained herself to be civil to him since that remonstrance of her uncle's, but to-night

the tenderness of his tone, its oily smoothness, its hypocritical sweetness, irritates her beyond all bearing.

'You mean that my presence is disagreeable to you.'

'You may construe my remark in that way if you please. I may respect you as my uncle's friend, but you really give me a little too much of your society for me to value you on your own account.'

'But it is on my own account that I seek to be valued, Sibyl. A fig for the respect you pay your uncle's friends! Give me love for love, truth for truth.'

'Love!' she echoes scornfully.

'Yes, love; am I so revolting a person that the word sounds obnoxious from my lips? Yes, Sibyl, love. You know that I love you devotedly, passionately, with the kind of love that can conquer obstacles and win its wish in spite of all opposing influences. There is nothing to oppose me but your own obdurate heart. Your uncle's most ardent desire is that you should be my wife.'

'You have worried him into expressing such a

desire,' replies Sibyl; 'but I do not believe that it is really his wish. His ardent desire before you came here was that I should marry Sir Wilford Cardonnel.'

'Sir Wilford Cardonnel has no claim upon your uncle's affection—can never be to him what I am.'

'Whatever you may be to my uncle, I only know that the effect of your presence has been to alter him strangely for the worse. There has been no happiness in this house since you have lived in it.'

Happily for Sibyl, she does not see the vindictive look—a look of wrath that is almost deadly—which Joel Pilgrim turns upon her after this speech. Her eyes are fixed on the shadowy line of woodland which shuts out the world beyond Sir John Boldero's park.

Joel takes time before replying to these uncomplimentary remarks, and his voice when he does reply has all its familiar blandness,—that oily smoothness which is so hateful to Sibyl.

'Why do you say these hard things to me, Sibyl?' he asks. 'Is it to prove my love—to test

my forbearance, and gauge the depth of my devotion by my power to endure your insults?'

'I have no wish to insult you,' replies Sibyl, feeling that she has gone a little too far, and that this scene may be used to her disadvantage with her uncle. 'We might be good friends if you would only leave me alone. I do not interfere with you. I am not jealous of your influence with my uncle. Why do you follow me about and persecute me with attentions which, as I have candidly told you, are disagreeable to me?'

'Why does the sunflower turn to the sun? I follow you because I love you, and because I have sworn to win love for love.'

'That you will never do.'

'Yes, Sibyl, love will come by-and-bye with time and custom, when you are my wife.'

'That day will never dawn.'

'Yes, it will, Sibyl. You have played your cards too well to throw up the game just at the last, when you are close upon winning. Come, we will abandon poetical similes and lovers' talk, and settle the subject like a man and woman of the world. With all

your sweetness there is a touch of worldly wisdom about you, Sibyl. We will speak plainly. You have set your heart upon inheriting your uncle's fortune, a prize worth winning, I grant—a diamond not to be found in every mine. You have wound yourself about the old man's heart, and have made yourself dear to him. You stand a good chance of being heiress to that incalculable wealth. But I come upon the scene, an adventurer, you think, perhaps, and one who seeks to deprive you of that vast inheritance. You are wrong, Sibyl. I have never schemed to inherit Stephen Trenchard's fortune; but he and I have certain business relations, and he is necessary to me. He is fond of me too, after his own fashion—just as he is fond of you—and he has made up his mind that we two shall be one. If you thwart that desire you hazard his favour, nay, I will go so far as to say that I know your refusal to gratify this wish would lead him to alter his will.'

'And you know that he has made a will in my favour?' cries Sibyl, betrayed into a question which, after a moment's reflection, she feels ashamed at having asked, of this man most of all.

'Yes,' replies Mr. Pilgrim, deliberately. 'I know that Stephen Trenchard has bequeathed the bulk of his fortune to you; nay, I may go so far as to say his entire fortune. Your sisters will be disappointed, I fear, but you have made yourself the favourite, you see.'

'And he is soon to die,' reflects Sibyl. 'If I offend him now by absolutely refusing to marry this man I shall lose all. If I can gain time—a very little time, perhaps—all will be mine.'

'Give me your answer, Sibyl,' pleads Joel. 'I am ready to forgive all the cruel things you have said. A woman's hard words signify but little. Tell me that you will be my own sweet wife, that I may go back to India by-and-bye, with a fair princess from the west—fairer than a dream to Indian eyes. Give me hope, Sibyl.'

'Give me time,' replies Sibyl. 'I have told you that—that I do not understand you—that the idea of your affection is at present most painful to me. Give me time to overcome what is perhaps an unworthy prejudice on my part. I would make any possible sacrifice to please my

uncle, who has been very good to me. With time, perhaps——'

'So be it,' says Joel, offering her his hand, that small, cold hand, whose touch she so much dislikes. 'Shake hands upon that, my princess. I will wait. You have no idea how patient I can be if I see my way clear to the end. Let Fortune say to me such or such a prize is there for you to win, and I will win it. I will win you, my love, if conquest lies within the limits of the possible.'

'And you will not torment me with attentions which——'

'"'Which only increase your prejudice against me. No, Sibyl, I will sink the lover and be only the man of the world. I will say to myself, "My love knows that it is her interest to overcome her distaste for me, that to refuse my hand is to throw away fortune. I have only to be patient. All good things come to him who can wait, like yonder moon which pierces that summer cloud, and shines upon some belated traveller, just when the way seemed darkest." Come, Sibyl, let us go back to our dear uncle—my uncle as well as

yours, by-and-bye. The dew is falling, and your English compounds—or gardens, as you call them —are so damp.'

They go back to the drawing-room, where Stephen Trenchard sits reading by a brilliant carcel lamp, and the look which Sibyl turns upon him is perhaps the most awful look that has ever scrutinized his face, for it is the gaze of one who watches for the tokens of death. Is that true which they all say? she wonders despairingly. Is the forecast shadow of the end dark upon his face already? Does that grayish tinge which overspreads the sallower tint beneath, mean only the slow advance of age? or is it the awful hue of swift approaching death? She cannot tell. He is so fitful in his health and spirits, feeble to helplessness to-day, full of restless activity to-morrow.

He looks up from his newspaper as they enter from the garden.

'Well, young people, have you been enjoying the moonlight?'

'Yes, we have had a pleasant stroll, the pleasantest I have had since I came to England.

I never saw a moonrise that shone upon such content as I feel to-night,' answers Joel.

Sibyl tries not to shudder too obviously.

'Shall I read to you, uncle?' she asks, feeling that even the money article will be better than lover-like speeches from the lips of Joel Pilgrim.

'No, my dear, I have finished my *Times*. You and Joel can play chess.'

It is a game of skill in which Joel excels and which Sibyl utterly detests. He has taught her to play just tolerably, and she would rather play chess with him—the game engaging all his faculties and exercising all his cunning—than hear him talk; so she takes her place at the board submissively, and Joel's tawny hands arrange the stately carven images, castles on elephants, Indian potentates for kings, Indian warriors for pawns, and Brahmins for bishops.

For a little while after this interview in the garden Sibyl's life is more endurable, for Mr. Pilgrim's attentions are less marked. He does not follow her from room to room so persistently as he did before his declaration. He allows her to ride alone,

horsemanship being an exercise which he cordially dislikes. She has leisure in which to brood upon the difficulties that hem her in, and calculate upon the hour which will bring her release.

But this period of repose does not last long. One morning her uncle sends Podmore to summon her to his study. She finds him seated at his table, which is littered with papers and letters, and before him lies that oblong volume which she saw on the night after the races, through the glass door, and which she supposes to be a ledger.

Joel Pilgrim stands by the window, very serious of aspect, his tawny countenance a shade paler than usual.

'I have sent for you to discuss a very important subject, Sibyl,' begins Mr. Trenchard, 'one that is vital to you and Joel.'

'Yes, uncle Stephen,' she answers falteringly, feeling as if she were expected to reply in some wise.

'Sit down, my dear. We may have much to say to each other;' and Sibyl sinks into the nearest chair, dreading to hear the rest. 'The last mail has

brought Joel some unpleasant—I should rather say some unexpected—news about his business in Calcutta. He will have to return to India almost immediately.'

Joel gnaws his nether lip and turns his face away from the speaker, perhaps to hide that vindictive look in eye and lip. Sibyl's heart beats furiously, but her agitation is full of joy. Heaven has sent her a reprieve. Her tormentor is obliged to depart. There will be an end of that hateful question about marriage.

'Yes, my dear, our poor Joel has to return to Calcutta by the next steamer, or the first steamer that he can be ready for, and he does not want to go back alone. You understand, Sibyl.'

Very ghastly is the change in Sibyl's face as she looks at her uncle, struck speechless by this sudden revulsion from gladness to despair.

'You understand, my dear?' repeats Stephen Trenchard.

'No indeed, uncle.'

'You have promised to be Joel's wife——'

'No, uncle, I gave no promise,' she falters with

white lips. 'I only said that I would try to like him better—that——'

'Bah! that's a girl's vague way of putting it. You women always beat about the bush. Joel looks upon it as a promise, and so do I. It is a settled thing. You and Joel are to be man and wife, thus fulfilling the dearest wish of my heart, as Joel's oldest friend and your nearest kinsman. By this means you will mutually enjoy all I have to bequeath. In a word, I have set my heart upon this marriage, Sibyl, and it cannot take place too soon. Joel's recall to India is a reason why it should take place immediately. Joel will lose no time in obtaining the licence. Let me see—this is Tuesday. When does the next Peninsular and Oriental leave Southampton, Joel?'

'On Monday.'

'Good; you can be married on Saturday. You can go to York for the licence this afternoon, Joel.'

'But, uncle Stephen, so soon—in a few days—it is impossible.'

'Nonsense, child! nothing is impossible to men of business, like Joel and me.—We have managed more

difficult things than this in our time, haven't we, Joel?'

A sardonic laugh is Joel's only answer. Persistent as he has been in his wooing, his air this morning is not exactly suggestive of delight, or of that entrancement which should belong to triumphant love.

'But you are so ill, uncle,—I could not leave you.'

'I am flattered by the affectionate thought, but I am not so ill as you suppose. And the idea that I have made you and Joel happy will be better than medicine.'

'My trousseau, uncle,—my outfit? To go to India at a few days' notice! I assure you that any one would tell you it is impossible.'

'Any one might tell me any absurdity, but I should not be obliged to believe them. Do not let us have any more young lady-like objections, Sibyl. The matter is settled. Joel will go to York by the two o'clock train, and I will write to Mr. Chasubel to give notice of the wedding on Saturday. As to trousseau, as you call it, you must have finery

enough to last your lifetime, I should think, judging from the length of your bill at Carmichael's; and now go, my dear; Joel and I have business matters to discuss for the next half-hour. Joel, salute your bride.'

Mr. Pilgrim intercepts Sibyl at the door, and takes her hand. He draws her towards him, as if about to kiss her on the lips, but there is something in her look so repellent, nay, so abhorrent, that even his audacity is checked. He falls back a little, and raises her hand to his lips, and with this ceremonious salutation lets her go.

'You are not a very warm lover, Joel,' says Stephen Trenchard, with a sneer, when the door has closed upon his niece. 'The sun of the tropics doesn't seem to have infused much of its fire into your veins.'

'You see me at a disadvantage,' replies the other, seating himself at the table, and examining one of those numerous documents with a moody attentiveness that suggests trouble. 'The girl hates me.'

'And you hate the girl. Is that it?'

'No. I think her one of the loveliest women I

ever saw; a prize worth winning at some cost of self-abasement. But her detestation for me is a little too obvious, and I must confess that I am somewhat less eager to win her than I was a few weeks ago.'

'Before I made certain confidences, eh, Joel? Never mind. I told you I would make her marry you, and you see I mean to keep my word. Loving or loathing will make very little difference to you, I take it. You will know how to make her obey you. You will have a pretty wife to uphold your position in Calcutta—a good card to play always where fools abound, as they do in the City of Palaces. And you will have the handling of my fortune.'

'I ought to be grateful,' replies Joel, coldly, with his eyes still bent upon a column of figures.

'And now, Joel, let us be business-like. I think you will confess that I have gone into your affairs thoroughly this morning. There has been no impatience. I have not been betrayed into one angry word, but I have arrived at a conclusion, and I shall abide by it.'

'And that is——'

'I must have ten thousand pounds from you between this and Saturday at nine in the morning. Just two hours before your wedding. Or else——'

'Or else what?'

'The house of Pilgrim and Company will go down like a vessel that breaks her back—straight to the bottom, Joel.'

'It is quite impossible.'

'Not to a man of business, Joel. To great generals and clear-headed commercial men there is nothing impossible. We only print the word in our dictionaries for the weak and brainless portion of humanity.'

'It is not to be done.'

'It is to be done, and it must be done,' retorts Stephen Trenchard, bringing down his clenched fist upon the open ledger, 'ten thousand pounds in hard cash, Joel—a drop out of the ocean, a brand from the burning. Borrow it, raise it how or where you can, among your English connections, but understand I must have it on Saturday morning, or before Saturday afternoon I shall have

telegraphed to my solicitors in Calcutta, and the house of Pilgrim will be doomed.'

'After all the money I have earned for you in the past?'

'That past is long gone by, Joel—it is the pluperfect. You have been sucking my blood like a vampire for the last three years, and have left me all but bloodless. I must have that ten thousand pounds.'

CHAPTER III..

AT BAY.

It is evening. Stephen Trenchard has retired to his room immediately after dinner, looking wan and wearied, worn out perhaps by that interview with Joel Pilgrim in the study. Sibyl has offered to go to his room and read to him, and has had her offer refused.

'I am tired, my dear, and want sleep, if I can get it; but that seems harder for me to obtain now than for a pauper to get gold. One would think the voice of doom had cried out to me, as it cried to Macbeth, "Sleep no more"!'

'Macbeth was a murderer, uncle. You should not compare yourself to him.'

'No; I have never dipped my hands in blood. I have used the world pretty much as it has used me, I believe—give and take.'

Sibyl is alone in a small sitting-room adjoin-

ing her bedroom; a pretty little room which Mr. Trenchard has allowed her to appropriate to herself, and which she has adorned with various elegant trifles from the Redcastle shops—books, engravings, statuettes—the things that women love.

Here she sits to-night, a prey to something very near despair. She is now completely hemmed in. Only two modes of escape lie before her. The first and more obvious is flight. She can leave Lancaster Lodge. There is no constraint upon her. She is free to go away, penniless as when she came, leaving fortune behind her. The second and more hazardous alternative is to prevail upon Joel Pilgrim to abandon his design; to induce him, of his own accord, to give up the idea of marriage until he is able to return from Calcutta.

Ten o'clock strikes, and soon afterwards she hears the bell at the lodge entrance, and then wheels grinding over the gravel, and she knows that Mr. Pilgrim has returned with the licence. She has breathed more freely during his absence, and his return seems to bring an atmosphere of trouble and perplexity into the house. Will he come to her,

or send for her to tell her that his hateful errand has been successfully accomplished? She sits listening for his detested footstep. The ears of hate are as keen as those of love, and she knows that footfall only too well.

Yes, there it comes along the carpeted corridor, slow and stealthy. 'The jungle tigers walk like that,' I dare say,' thinks Sibyl.

Joel opens the door softly and comes in. The dull yellow of his complexion is relieved by a crimson flush on the smooth cheeks. His black eyes glitter with an unaccustomed light. Mr. Pilgrim has dined more generously than usual at York, and has refreshed himself with soda and brandy more than once during the homeward journey. He is altogether a different man from that Joel Pilgrim who recoiled from Sibyl this morning, abashed by her coldness.

'I saw the light in your window, my pretty one,' he says, seating himself at the table where Sibyl is reading, and drawing his chair close to hers, 'and I knew where to find you.'

'Hadn't you better go downstairs and order

some supper, Mr. Pilgrim? It is nearly eleven o'clock, and the house will be going to bed almost immediately.'

'Let the house go to Gehenna,' exclaims Joel; 'I want nothing it can give me. I only want to see your lovely eyes, Sibyl, to hear your sweet voice, and to claim the kiss you denied me this morning. Look here,' taking a paper from his breast pocket; 'the Archbishop of York has given me permission to make you my wife; the knot is to be tied next Saturday; in four days, Sibyl—only four days, you who have been so cruel, you who have held me aloof so long, will be all my own. Yes, Sibyl; you who have pretended to hate me——'

'Pretended!' cries Sibyl, with an angry flash from her dark eyes. 'My hatred has been very real.'

'I am glad of that. They say extremes meet. It will be an easy transition from hatred to love; both are fiery passions. It is your lukewarm indifference that can never be kindled into affection.'

'Now is the time,' thinks Sibyl, if I am to

make an appeal to his forbearance, his pity, his self-interest. I can but try him.'

'Mr. Pilgrim,' she begins falteringly.

'What a formal mode of addressing your affianced lover—the man who has his marriage licence in his pocket!'

'I can call you by no other name,' she answers. 'I am going to be more candid to-night than I have ever been. You may betray my confidence, perhaps ruin me with my uncle; I cannot help it. Between you, you have driven me to bay.'

'Very cruel of us,' murmurs Joel, leaning back in his chair and looking at her with an admiring smile. She is very lovely in her agitation; cheeks faintly flushed, eyes brilliant, parted lips of carnation. Her suffering moves him not a jot.

'You have seen how I have striven to avoid you. You have put my avoidance down to hatred, and this perhaps has galled your pride—you have felt a natural anger against me, and you have resolved to win me in order to revenge yourself upon my insolence.'

'A very subtle way of putting the case. No,

Sibyl; I resolved to win you because you are lovely, and I love you. I need no stronger reasons than those two.'

'You could not be determined to make me miserable unless I had provoked your anger. Forgive me for my seeming hatred of you; it was not really hatred of you, but love for another. My heart has long been given to another. I have pledged myself to be faithful to him to the end of my life, no matter what obstacles might intervene to keep us asunder. There are reasons why I can never tell my uncle of this engagement, reasons why I must keep it faithfully in spite of the world.'

'No reason can stand against the archbishop's licence, and the fact that you and I are to be married on Saturday,' replies Joel, with the same insolent smile—the smile of a schemer who has brought his plot to a triumphant issue.

Sibyl has one argument still to offer. The strongest.

'You tell me that my uncle has made a will in my favour, that he will leave me all his fortune,' she says.

'Yes, that is a settled thing. You heard him say that we were to have his wealth—you and I.'

'I did. And we can share it. Share it honourably and equally, without the hateful tie which would bring us nothing but misery. Release me from this entanglement, Mr. Pilgrim. Tell my uncle that you would rather defer our marriage until you return from Calcutta. He is not likely to see that day. Do this, and I will pledge myself in any way that you may consider most binding. I will sign any document you choose to put before me, engaging myself to deliver over to you half my uncle's fortune, whatever it may be, the day I become possessed of it.'

'A very liberal and business-like offer,' exclaims Joel, with a quiet sneer, which freezes all hope. It is so pitiless! 'But I would rather have the pretty wife and the whole of the fortune, as by the existing arrangement I shall. Of course I shall knock off a handsome sum for pin-money. Your uncle hints that your tastes are somewhat extravagant, and Calcutta is not a place to teach economy. I shall

not be a severe husband, and I shall like to see my wife the queen of taste and fashion.'

Sibyl sits with her hands clasped on the table before her, unhearing, unheeding. She has made her last appeal, and she might as usefully have made it to stone. There is nothing for her now but flight. Yes, one alternative. She may confess all to Stephen Trenchard—tell him that she has been an impostor—that she has duped him into giving her his affection—that the wealth he has bequeathed to her will be shared by the son of his unforgiven foe.

No hope lies that way. She has played her desperate game to the last, and she must throw up the cards.

Once resolved, courage and calmness return together. She glances at the Swiss toy clock on the chimney-piece.

'Eleven o'clock, Mr. Pilgrim, and I am very tired. I really must wish you good night.'

She rises, gathers together her dainty fancy work, closes her book, and holds out her hand to Joel Pilgrim.

But there is more of his native sunshine in Mr. Pilgrim's veins to-night than there was at noon to-day, and he is not to be satisfied with so cold a salutation from his affianced bride.

'You refused me my kiss this morning, Sibyl. I must exercise my privilege to-night.'

His arm is round her, he tries to draw her towards him, but that slim form recoils from him as from something more hateful than death.

'Do not touch me,' exclaims Sibyl, in a voice that is scarcely above a whisper. 'You cannot guess how much I would dare to escape such pollution. Look at this,' taking a small glass phial from her pocket, and holding it up before him. 'Do you know what this is? Sure and instant death. I would rather this should pass my lips than that your lips should touch them.'

'I did not know you were a member of the Borgia family, or that such delightful customs prevailed among young ladies in England,' says Mr. Pilgrim, letting her go, and contemplating her excited countenance with a gloomy look. 'But

perhaps you are only playing with me, and that bottle of yours contains one of those homœopathic preparations so fashionable now-a-days, a globule of poison diluted with a gallon of water.'

'It contains prussic acid, which I took from my uncle's surgery a few days ago, so that I might have one resource against all evils, even the horror of your touch.'

'Not very complimentary to the man who is to be your husband next Saturday. Don't be foolish, Sibyl. Give me that bottle, and let me throw it under the grate.'

'No, you shall not take it from me,' exclaims Sibyl, clenching her hand upon the phial, so tightly that it would need some exercise of Mr. Pilgrim's brute force to take it from her.

'Keep it then,' he cries savagely. 'Keep it, and reconcile yourself to all the evil it may do you. You are a heartless and unreasonable woman, and deserve to suffer for your folly. Keep your deadly poison, but remember your English proverb which tells you that it is dangerous to play with edged tools. And so good night, Miss Faunthorpe. I'm

afraid I shall have a vixen for a wife, and get the worst of it in our domestic quarrels.'

Thus, with a sneer, he leaves her.

'No resource,' murmurs Sibyl, 'none but flight —or—' she looks at the little bottle, full of a colourless liquid—'or this.'

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF A DISCOVERY.

ALEXIS goes back to Cheswold Grange, and resumes the even tenor of his life, a prosperous country gentleman, with very little to occupy him, and plenty of leisure in which to muse upon destiny, and dream of the things that might have been. The hunting season has long been over. It is the time of roses, and he has no temptation to endanger his neck upon Bayard again just yet awhile. He rides his steady little brown mare in the shady roads and lanes round Cheswold, while Bayard stretches his noble limbs in the home paddock, and gathers strength for the crisp, clear days of October and the chill mists of November.

It is a pleasant life, but an idle one, and a thought too lonely. True that there is plenty of society in the neighbourhood, and Mr. Secretan, of Cheswold, is popular; but life cannot be a succession

of dinner parties, and Alexis has little inclination for croquet and garden parties, archery, fancy fairs, or any of those small amusements which beguile the long days of a country summer.

The two young men have scarcely returned to the Grange when Richard Plowden declares that he must go home.

'I've been with you nearly a year, Alexis,' he says. 'I am sure you must be sick of my society.'

'When I am, be sure I'll let you know it, Dick,' answers the other, laughing. 'You're the best company in the world to me, for you're a kind of second self. I can talk to you as I talk to no one else. You know all my secrets.'

'All of them?' asks Dick, gravely.

'Yes, Dick, all—or if there is a vague, undeveloped thought or dream I have not shared with you, it has not been for want of confidence in your fidelity.'

'I believe that,' replies Dick, deeply moved. 'But I must go home all the same. This kind of life is all very well for a short time, but it can't go on—it would spoil me for the rough work-a-day world.'

'Let it spoil you, Dick. Why should you ever go back to the work-a-day world? You are my adopted brother, as dear to me as if we had slept in the same cradle, or lain in the same mother's arms My home is yours, my income yours, and if Fate cuts me off untimely you will not find yourself unprovided for. Your mother is happy with her lodgers and her housekeeping, to say nothing of the fernery, which she tells you has flourished under her care. Why talk of leaving me, Dick?'

'You are too good; and I am more grateful than any words of mine can tell. But I must go all the same.'

'You are not happy with me, Dick?'

'I have been most happy with you.'

'Have been. That means you are not happy now. It is you who are tired of my company That long illness of mine wore you out. You had too much of me at Dorley Mill.'

At the name of Dorley Mill a spasm of pain passes across Richard Plowden's face—so faint that it might have escaped a less watchful observer than Alexis. But Alexis is sorely puzzled by Dick's

desire to leave him, and is watchful of his friend's countenance.

'Too much of your company—no, Alexis. You know that your company is like the wine of life for me.'

'And yet you persist in leaving me. There must be some reason.'

'There is a reason—one that I can never tell you. A foolish reason. But strong enough to send me away from Cheswold.'

'And the roses, and the ferns, and all those bright things of summer you love so well—you to whom the hills and woods and wandering streams are new. You would exchange all the pleasures of the country for the Brompton Road and the ever-flowing stream of many-coloured omnibuses, the cry of the hawker, the reek of the ham and beef shop, the glare of the gin-palace? The reason must be a strong one, Dick.'

'It is as strong as Fate.'

'And you will not trust me with it?'

'I cannot tell you my reasons. You would laugh at me, despise me.'

'Try me, Dick. Suppose I can guess your secret.'

'Oh no, no!' cries Dick, with alarm.

'Those days at Dorley Mill, when my broken ribs were slowly knitting themselves together again —peaceful, happy days, were they not, Dick? That quaint Elizabethan homestead seemed more like home to both of us than this good old house of mine. It had the atmosphere of home, which this has not. There is no such thing as home without the presence of a woman. We were very happy—in a tranquil, sleepy fashion—at Dorley, weren't we, Dick?'

'Very happy,' answers Dick, looking down at an open book, the leaves of which he turns over restlessly, as if looking for some particular passage.

'And now I begin to fear that Dorley Mill was an unlucky place for both of us. Neither of us came away heart-whole.'

'Alex,' cries Dick, looking up.

'No half-confidences, old friend. You see I am not afraid to trust *you*. Such a confession comes

amiss from me, you think—from me who am bound fast by an old tie—which, if the marriage tie could be broken by a wife's unkindness, might well have been cancelled for me last December, when I stood before that mercenary wife of mine and pleaded the cause of love against money. Do not be alarmed, Dick, I am not going to sophisticate. The old tie is binding, and the old bond shall be honoured, though it should keep me a lonely man for the rest of my days. But I may be forgiven if I have had my dream of what might have been—if I have thought how fair and perfect my life might be made in this good old home of mine, were I but free to seek Linda Challice for my wife.'

'Yes,' murmurs Dick, 'I thought so.'

'You thought that I was human, Dick, and that it was not easy for me to feel all the sweetness of Linda's society—to be sheltered and cherished by her kindness—to know that I owed my life to her patient tenderness, and withhold my heart from her altogether. My heart went out to her, Dick, unawares, but by not so much as a word or look did I ever betray my secret. I woke one day to a full

'knowledge of my peril, and the next day I left Dorley Mill.'

'You acted nobly,' cries Dick, clasping his friend's hand. 'Yes, I suspected the truth, and it made my own thoughts all the more bitter. How could she think of me? What a worm I must seem to her beside you!'

'She shall think of you, Dick. She shall learn to know your noble heart—your talents—your love of all that is lofty and lovely in life. She shall learn to understand you and appreciate you as I do. Trust to time, Dick, and me. It shall be my task to win her for you.'

'Impossible,' sighs Dick. 'She is won already, and not by me.'

'Silence, Dick. There is treason against her in such an insinuation. She knew that I was married.'

'She must have known it at the last, but I am not quite sure that she knew it at first, unless anything you said when you awoke from your delirium may have enlightened her. I don't think, somehow, that she did know it. Remember, you were a perfect stranger to her. You came to Dorley Mill as if you

had dropped from the clouds. How should she know anything of your domestic history, which has only been whispered amongst your neighbours?'

'You might have told her my painful story, Dick.'

'It was not my business. It would have been an impertinence in me to gabble about your affairs. I felt assured that you would tell her.'

'Why should I do so, Dick? I am not a coxcomb. I foresaw no peril to myself in my association with that sweet girl, still less did I imagine danger to her. I accepted all her bounties as if she had been verily a ministering angel lent to this lower world for a little while to be my comfort. Upon my word, Dick, I think there is a spice of folly—or unconscious jealousy, perhaps—in your notion that I am any more to Miss Challice than the traveller who fell by the wayside.'

'I can read her face,' answers Dick, sorrowfully, 'and it has told me her secret.'

Alexis is moved by this conviction of Richard Plowden's. For so little he could be glad. He sees the fair young face, the bended brow, the soft eyes

which have so often avoided his own. Dare he interpret those signs—those little looks which he remembers so well—as the tokens of a hidden passion? Dare he suffer himself to believe that while Linda Challice ministered to him pity grew to love in her heart, as gratitude widened into love in his? The thought that it is so can bring him nothing but sorrow; yet he finds himself encouraging the fancy notwithstanding.

'I am a weak fool, Dick,' he cries at last, after pacing the firelit library for some time; 'and you ought not to say these things to me. Linda Challice does know that I have a wife. She learned it directly from my own lips; but only on the morning before I left Dorley. But she shall know all my wretched story. She shall know that I deserve her pity, though I dare not ask for her love. I am bound to pay one more visit to Dorley Mill, if it is only to repeat my thanks for all her goodness to me. I will go to-morrow. I have ordered a little present for her from London which I think she will like.'

'She is not a girl to care for presents,' says Dick.

'You sulky old bear! women love souvenirs and keepsakes.'

'Yes, when they love the giver.'

'You know that shabby silver watch she wears.'

'It was her father's,' growls Dick; 'he wore it to the day of his death, or had it under his pillow on his death-bed. He died in Rome, you know, in something like impoverished circumstances. I dare say he had a fine gold hunter when his pictures were the fashion.'

'Poor fellow! it was his watch, was it? Then I'm afraid Lin—— Miss Challice won't care for the one I've bought her.'

Alexis takes a neat little morocco case out of a drawer in the library table, a dainty case lined with white velvet, on which reposes the most fascinating of watches—about the size of a florin. The case is dark purple enamel, with Linda's monogram in pearls, and round the watch is coiled a slender gold chain set with pearls.

'Rather too pretty for a miller's granddaughter,' says Dick. 'But I've no doubt she'll be pleased. Did you buy anything for Mr. Benfield?'

'Yes, Dick, I didn't forget the miller;' and from another drawer Alexis produces a splendid meerschaum pipe. 'The old gentleman can smoke his tobacco in that when he sits by the fire after supper.'

'I don't suppose it will draw as well as his clay,' murmurs Dick.

The drawing-room at the Grange seems more than usually empty that evening when the two young men leave the dining-table. It is a wet night, and they lack the amusement which the gardens and stable yard afford them in fine weather. Alexis has read all the magazines and newspapers, and is hardly in the humour for serious literature, although all his favourite authors, newly bound and newly arranged upon the shelves in the library, invite him to study. His mind is disturbed, he knows not why. He takes up a volume of Tennyson from the table and turns the leaves idly till he comes to that exquisite poem called 'Love and Duty.' This he reads aloud, Richard Plowden listening intently.

'That was written by a MAN, Dick,' he says

when he has finished. 'Byron-worshipper as I am, I confess that there is more stamina in that than in all Childe Harold's wailing against destiny. But then Byron died in the flower of his manhood. We know not what noble fruit the tree might have borne had it grown to maturity. Byron never came to the age at which Scott began to be a poet, or at which Goethe wrote his masterpiece. What would have been the aftermath of Byron and Shelley had inexorable death spared so much genius?'

After this Alexis and his friend talk of their favourite poets, and both brighten a little as their thoughts drift away from their own individual sorrows.

Soon after breakfast next morning, Alexis mounts Titmouse and rides down to Dorley, through the perfumed lanes where the dog-roses and woodbine make a tangle of flowers among the young oak saplings and the sturdy hawthorn bushes. Dorley Mill is looking its prettiest as he rides along the winding track that leads to it. Trot is sitting in the porch playing with a very fat black and white puppy with a round stupid-looking head,

a puppy that has not long been added to the population of Dorley.

At the sight of Alexis, Trot lets fall his pinafore, and gives the puppy a sudden drop in the world. It is the youthful animal's first experience of the uncertainty of friendship, and he yelps out his remonstrance against life's delusions.

'Mammie!' yells Trot, 'mammie, come out, it's the genlamum.' In spite of their familiarity, Trot has never learnt to call Alexis anything but the 'genlamum.'

Linda is not forthcoming, and Trot remembers presently that mammie has gone down to the village.

'She not be long,' says Trot. 'I'll show oo my noo puppy;' and he introduces that animal, held firmly by the tail.

'Daddie says he grow big—ever so big—bigger than Trot,' says the boy, opening his eyes tremendously wide. They are hazel eyes, with lashes of gold, which time will darken to brown.

'I'll come in and wait, Trot,' says Alexis, dismounting, and tying Titmouse to the gatepost. She

is a lazy animal, and has no objection to stand there nibbling the grass by the wayside.

He goes in at the familiar porch, beneath which he was carried unconscious on the day of his accident, and seats himself by Linda's work-table. How pleasant the room is to his sight! how homelike! There are the books Linda read to him—the books that seemed to breathe a deeper pathos and holier tenderness when she read. There is her drawing-board with an unfinished landscape, a wind of the river overshadowed by willows. There are the flowers her hand has arranged; there the sofa on which he passed so many reposeful hours of unthinking happiness.

'Why did I permit myself to be so happy?' he thinks, in self-reproach. 'It was a pleasant dream, but the return to life's dull reality is a little hard to bear.'

He rouses himself from his musing mood, and begins to talk to Trot, taking Trot and the puppy on his knee together. Trot stops tolerably quiet; but the puppy begins a perambulation—a voyage of discovery up and down Mr. Secretan's coat sleeves

and collar, and even on to his head, which is more familiar than agreeable.

'Well, Trot, you haven't forgotten me, I hope?'

'I not forgotten oo, but I don't love oo no more,' replies Trot, decisively.

'Not love me any more? Oh, Trot, that is cruel. Why not?'

'Why oo go 'way and make mammie cry?' demands Trot, facing the accused with magisterial severity.

Alexis crimsons at the interrogation.

'I never made mammie cry,' he falters.

'That's a tory. Oo did. She cried the day oo went,—she cried a little every day, she said it was a headache,—Trot knows better, she not such a coward as to cry for a headache. Trot doesn't cry when his head aches, he's a man!'

'Yes, but mammie's only a woman, Trot, and a headache might make her cry if it was a very bad one. Mammie wouldn't tell a story.'

'She says *I* mustn't,' responds Trot, 'but I think she did. Grown-up people may do anything. Mayn't they tell tories?'

'No, Trot, not good people. Only wicked people tell stories.'

A shadow flits across the threshold, and the subject of their conversation enters. Trot scrambles off Mr. Secretan's knee and runs to his adopted mother.

'I told him he was naughty to go away and make oo cry,' says Trot, 'and he says he didn't.'

'Foolish Trot. What silly notions you get into your head!' says Linda, bending over the child and blushing deeply.

Alexis sees the blush, and he sees something more than that. He sees that Linda has changed within the ten days that have gone by since he left Dorley Mill. A settled pallor succeeds that fleeting red. Her eyes are sunken, and there is a dark line beneath them, which deepens their colour, and gives a pathetic expression that touches him to the heart. She has cared for him, she has been sorry for him, and he, poor fettered wretch, dare say no word of his care or his sorrow for her. She must drink the cup of humiliation to the dregs, and know that the man

to whom her innocent heart has gone forth is the property of another.

'I have been anxious to come and tell you once more how gratefully I shall ever remember your goodness to me,' says Alexis, after they have talked about Trot and Trot's puppy for a few minutes. The puppy is to grow up into a Newfoundland if it realizes the expectations of its friends, but there is an element of uncertainty in these things, and Alexis has a lurking conviction that this puppy will develop into the most mongrel of mongrels.

'Believe me, neither my grandfather nor I consider our care of you a matter for gratitude, Mr. Secretan,' replies Linda. 'Providence brought you to our door. We should have been very unchristian-like if we had not cared for you. I think you must know that if you had been the poorest tramp that ever dropped down on the road-side we should have done the same.'

'I am quite sure of that,' replies Alexis, 'and that is why I have never ventured to speak about the expense that my illness must have entailed upon you.'

'Pray relieve your mind upon that score. Your

housekeeper sent all the broths and jellies, hothouse fruits, poultry, game, and wines from the Grange. I think you only cost us a few new-laid eggs and a little milk. Mrs. Bodlow kept our larder almost too well supplied in her anxiety that you should have nourishing diet.'

'Mrs. Bodlow only did her duty. But lightly as you regard the obligation, Miss Challice, it is one which I shall carry to my dying day. If ever I am inclined to make a bad use of this life of mine, I will remember how hard you strove to win it back from the grave. I have ventured to bring you something —a little gold watch, with your initials on the back, which I hope you will wear sometimes in remembrance of the many weary hours you spent by the stranger's sick bed.'

'I will wear it always,' replies Linda, with tears in her eyes.

'Oo can't wear two wathes,' exclaims Trot. 'Oo wear oor fazer's wath.'

'I shall keep that among my treasures, Trot; but it is nearly worn out, poor old watch, and I am sure this will keep better time.'

'Oo like this best 'cause the genlamum give it oo,' cries the far-seeing Trot.

Alexis pretends not to hear this last observation, and produces the meerschaum pipe, which Linda admires amazingly, and which Trot wants to have in his mouth and to make believe to smoke, as he does sometimes with daddie's homelier clay.

'Dear little Trot,' exclaims Alexis, 'how your small voice would enliven us at Cheswold Grange. You cannot imagine how dull it is there, Miss Challice, in the long summer evenings.'

'No? And yet I think I know how long the summer evenings can be. But Trot would not do much to enliven them. He is worn out by seven o'clock. Oh, by the way, talking of Trot, I have made one little discovery since you left us.'

'What is that?' cries Alexis, eagerly.

'Don't let me raise false expectations. It is such a trifle, scarcely worth mentioning, but you seemed anxious to find out our little darling's parentage, and this seems a clue, however small.'

'What is it?' Pray tell me. I am most anxious, more anxious than I can explain.'

'Pray do not excite yourself, Mr. Secretan. I was looking over some papers in my desk, the other day, when I came upon the blank sheet of note-paper which contained that last remittance for Trot,—I remember it on account of the peculiar way in which it was folded,—and I noticed for the first time that there was a name stamped upon it in the corner, the name of the stationer who supplied it, no doubt.'

'Yes, of course.'

'I have saved the sheet of paper to show you. The name is Morgan, Redcastle.'

Alexis starts from his chair and seizes Trot as if he would take possession of him on the instant. He is speechless with surprise.

'You know the name of that place.'

'Know it? yes. I have reason, bitter reason, to know it. A small town in Yorkshire. And that money, obviously sent by the child's mother, was sent from Redcastle?'

'One would suppose so.'

'There can be no doubt of it. Tell me, Miss Challice, if I were to show you a photograph of the woman you sheltered, the mother of this boy, would

you recognise her? The picture I shall show you was taken in the bloom of her beauty. You saw her —should it indeed be the same woman—faded, worn by care and deprivation. Should you know the face under such altered conditions?'

'I should know it anywhere. But why should you be so agitated? Why should the mere name of this place excite you so much?'

'Ask me no questions till I come back to you with the photograph,' says Alexis. 'I shall go and return as fast as my horse will carry me.'

'Pray be careful. Remember——'

'That I have been thrown! Trust me, dear Miss Challice. I will run no risks. I am too anxious to settle the question of Trot's parentage.'

He takes the child in his arms, kisses him as he has never kissed him yet in all their friendly companionship, gives him back to Linda, and runs out at the gate.

He has mounted Titmouse and is out of sight before Linda has recovered from her astonishment at his agitation.

'Genlamum's in a hurry!' exclaims Trot.

CHAPTER V.

A FATHER'S CLAIM.

ALEXIS scarcely knows what he is doing during that scamper back to Cheswold Grange.

Titmouse, inspirited by the knowledge that she is going home to her stable and two o'clock feed, throws her shoulders forward and sends out her feet, trotting as if for a wager.

'Take off her bridle and give her some corn,' says Alexis to the groom who receives him. shall want her again in ten minutes.'

He goes to the library, unlocks a despatch box, and takes out an oblong velvet case, containing his wife's portrait—a picture taken by a famous photographer during their bright Parisian honeymoon,—the portrait of a girl-bride, lovely, elegantly dressed, smiling at the unknown future, and unconscious that these happy, idle honeymoon hours were eating up the capital that should have served to start husband

and wife in the business of life. It is a photograph of Sibyl at her best—before secret cares and hypocrisies had wrought their lines on her fair young face.

Alexis contemplates the picture regretfully for a few moments before he puts it in his pocket.

'Yes, she was very lovely then,' he tells himself. 'And there is nothing in this face that bespeaks a heart capable of treachery or deceit. It was poverty's bitter school that spoiled her. Some noble spirits grow strong by treading the rough ways of life—hers was too weak to survive the ordeal of misfortune. Poor child, she must have suffered!'

He is on Titmouse again and returning to Dorley in a few minutes, very much against the mare's inclination. She indulges in a stubborn crawl, or, being touched up with the whip, jogs and jolts her rider in an irregular trot, expressive of supreme ill-temper. Urged out of this, she sets off in a furious canter, as if to inform him that she has some 'go' left in her yet, in spite of ill-usage, and may contrive to pitch him over her head if he is too aggravating.

These devices finally bring Alexis to Dorley, where he finds Linda and Trot in the front garden, evidently on the watch for him.

'I am so glad you have returned,' cries Linda. 'You have made me quite miserable.'

'Forgive me, dear Miss Challice, but if you knew what hopes that one little word Redcastle have raised in my mind! See here'—he takes the case from his pocket and shows her Sibyl's photograph,—'does that face remind you of any face you have ever seen before?'

'Yes,' she answers, pale to the lips, but without an instant's hesitation, 'it is the portrait of Trot's mother. She was not so beautiful as that. She was thin and worn and haggard, but I should recognise the eyes and mouth anywhere. It is she.'

'This is the portrait of my wife, Linda; and Trot, the helpless baby you adopted in order to save him from the hazards of his mother's distraction or despair, is my son.'

'You told me your son was dead.'

'I was taught to believe so. My wife, for some mysterious reason, told me that cruel lie. She was

ashamed, perhaps, of having abandoned our child to the care of another, and feared to tell me the truth.'

'Are you sure?' falters Linda. 'You are not deceiving yourself and me?'

'If you are sure that this picture is the portrait of Trot's mother, there can be no doubt that Trot is my son.'

'And you will take him away from me,' says Linda, piteously; 'just when he has grown most dear. After all I have suffered—all I have borne patiently for his sake—I am to lose him. That is hard.'

'If you knew how I have pined for a son, Linda—what day-dreams I have woven about my little one's image—how bitter a grief I felt when I was told that wicked lie about his death—you would understand my rapture at finding him, my eagerness to claim him for my own—my darling, my hope, my precious care, heir to the fortune that Providence has dropped into my lap—poorly deserved on my part Heaven knows. He shall be better worthy of it.'

'Yes,' murmurs Linda, faintly, 'I can understand. It is only natural. He is your son; your rights are sacred.'

'And you have suffered for his sake, Linda. Your generosity has been rewarded by the world's injustice. But I can set all right. I shall claim him for my own, and every one round and about Cheswold and Dorley shall know all his story. Yes, I will not blush to tell the whole bitter truth. How my wife left me in poverty, and how my son was born in a workhouse.'

They are standing in the parlour, Trot watching their excited countenances, with wonder depicted upon his own.

'You have a right to take him away,' says Linda, sadly, 'but I think you will take all the sunshine of our lives with him. My grandfather is almost as fond of him as I am.'

'I am not going to dissever old links, Linda. He shall come often to see you. He shall be taught to know you as the guardian angel of his infancy; he shall always remember his first home.'

'Yes, but it will be his home no longer,' replies Linda, with a sigh.

Alexis is silent. He feels that he must seem a wretch, a destroyer, entering this happy household only to ruin its joy. But how can he forego his claim? How can he relinquish the delight of watching his son's infancy develop into boyhood—guiding the baby mind, making the boy at once pupil and plaything, source of all his pleasures in the present and all his hopes in the future?

At this juncture Trot, who has listened intently, arrives at the comprehension that he has a personal interest in the conversation. He catches at the idea that he is to be taken away—transferred from mammie to the genlamum, and he suddenly bursts in upon the conversation with a dismal howl.

'Me won't be took away; me stay with mammie,' cries the boy, and he clambers up into Linda's arms, and clings there as if resolved to resist any attempt at dislodging him.

'What, Trot,' cries Alexis, smiling at the little one's excitement, 'won't you come and live with me, and have a dear little Shetland pony to ride, and a

big garden to play in, and a rocking-horse,—and a —lots of plum cakes and picture-books?' Here Alexis's knowledge of juvenile weaknesses fails him, and he knows not what further temptation to offer.

'Me won't have pony, me not want oor garden, me got nice big garden, me want mammie,' cries Trot, and he clings still tighter to Linda.

'Trot, shall I tell you a secret?'

''Ess,' says Trot, who thinks that a secret must needs be something worth hearing.

'You must come and live with me, Trot, my darling. God meant you and me to live together. I'm your father!'

'No, you not,' screams the boy, 'you're the gen-lamum with the broken arm. Me never have no fazer.'

'And you won't come to live at the Grange? Such a large garden, six times as big as the garden here, and a Shetland pony with a long tail.'

'Me won't,' cries Trot, emphatically. 'Bozer de pony!'

'Trot has decided, Miss Challice,' says Alexis, gravely. 'If I were ungrateful enough, selfish

enough, to wish to take him from you, his childish heart is true and fast. He shall stay with you, since you wish it, for the next few years at any rate. This shall be his home, and he shall come to Cheswold only as a visitor. You will let me have him sometimes?'

'Let you have him! Oh, Mr. Secretan, are you not too generous in consenting to leave him with me?'

'I should be an ungrateful hound if I could refuse. You have made my son's infancy bright and happy. You have saved him from the evils of poverty—from his mother's selfishness. How can I be grateful enough to you?'

'Only let me keep my darling a little longer, and I am more than recompensed. I must be proud and happy too, when I have recovered a little from this surprise, to know that he is your son—that his future will be bright and prosperous—his worldly position honourable,—to think that my little waif and stray should be the future squire of Cheswold. My grandfather will be so pleased. It is a triumph for me over him, dear old man, for he said that I

was very foolish to adopt a nameless child, and now my dearest has name and fortune, home and father.'

'We will make a good man of him between us, Miss Challice,' says Alexis, more elated by this discovery than he was by the inheritance of Miss Secretan's estate. He has no doubt as to Trot's identity—there seems to him no room for doubt, yet he is anxious to make things as certain as possible—to secure independent evidence in case his claim to his son should ever be disputed.

He goes back to the Grange only to get a fresh horse, and then rides into the quiet old cathedral town to talk the matter over with Mr. Scrodgers. He does not consider the provincial solicitor a Mansfield or a Cockburn; but Mr. Scrodgers's is the best legal intellect available on the spot, and to Mr. Scrodgers he goes.

The family solicitor listens to all Alexis has to tell with the gravity of a learned owl that has lived century or so in the same ivy bush. He contracts his eyebrows, he purses up his lips, and looks as if he had known the whole story before, but, for some wise reason he had kept his knowledge to himself.

'A curious case, Mr. Secretan,' he says at last, 'a very curious case. It's lucky your estate is not entailed.'

'Why so?'

'There might have been difficulties in the way of succession. It might not be easy to identify this infant—born in such a very irregular manner—as your son and heir. There might be suspicions. The heir-at-law might file a bill in Chancery. I should consider it a very hazardous business were your estate entailed; but you as an independent man, fettered by no entail, may leave your real property to Tom, Dick, or Harry. I should recommend you to take this infant into your house at once, let him bear your name, let him be recognised by all your acquaintances as your son.'

'Yes, I shall take care of that. I shall tell everybody. But there is a difficulty about bringing him into my house. The lady who brought him up—who rescued him from I know not what misery—has a claim upon his affection, the strongest, and as strong a claim on my gratitude. To take him away from her would be almost to break her heart.'

'Almost, but not quite. There's a long distance between the two adverbs,' replies the cynical Scrodgers. 'Most women have their hearts almost broken once in their lives. Give her a new bonnet.'

'You do not know the lady, sir. She is not a woman to be solaced by a bonnet.'

'Hasn't she a head?' asks Mr. Scrodgers. 'I never knew a woman, with a head, that a bonnet wouldn't pacify. Half the cases at the assizes, in which the female is a plaintiff, might be settled out of court if the defendant knew when and how to offer the *solatium* of a bonnet.'

'I see, Mr. Scrodgers, you are a bachelor and a misogynist,' says Alexis, smilingly.

'No, sir,' replies the lawyer, 'I am a misogynist, and a married man.'

'The first thing I have to do is to alter my will,' says Alexis, returning to the business question.

'Decidedly. If you are convinced that this infant—hereinbefore named—is your son, you had better make a will in his favour.'

'Prepare one as fast as you can, Mr. Scrodgers, leaving the bequest to my good friend Plowden just as it stands.'

'You must have trustees in case of your dying before the child attains his majority.'

'Make Plowden trustee.'

'You should have a second, in the event of Mr. Plowden's death.'

'How you lawyers remind us of our mortality! Well, make Miss Challice the second trustee and guardian of the boy in case of my death. Nobody will ever love him better than she does.'

'And in the event of her marriage——'

'Marriage would make no difference in her. She would always love my boy.'

Mr. Scrodgers relieves his doubtful mind by a faint smile. His idea of marriage is that it makes a very great difference. To his legal mind marriage transforms a man. Even the will he made as a bachelor is no longer valid, proving that in the eye of the law the married man and the bachelor are two distinct personages.

'Then you would recommend me to get together

all the evidence I can bearing upon my boy's birth says Alexis.

'I think it would be wise to do so. The fact of your parentage may never be disputed. You can dispose of the Cheswold estate as you choose, but still it might be well to have all necessary documents —an attested copy of your marriage certificate, and so on.'

'Yes, I was a reckless fellow when I married. Heaven knows what became of the certificate. My wife may have kept it. Certainly I didn't take any care of it. The parson had made her my wife. That was all I thought about on that bewildering day.'

Then you had better get a copy of the register without delay.'

'Yes, and I will go to the woman with whom my wife and I lodged. She will remember that my wife was expecting to become a mother when she left me. If that woman is to be found I will get from her a written declaration of that fact.'

'It would be as well to do so,' says Mr. Scrodgers, approvingly, and Alexis leaves him to prepare the

new will, which he is to bring to the Grange early next morning.

'Stay,' says the lawyer, on the threshold. 'You haven't told me the infant's Christian name.'

'He was christened William.'

'No other name?'

'I believe not. But you can fill in the names to-morrow. I will ask that question in the meantime.'

Alexis goes back to Cheswold pondering on the lawyer's advice about his son. Mr. Scrodgers has distinctly said that it is for the child's welfare, for the security of his future position, that he should be domiciled with his father; and Alexis longs to have the little one under the same roof with him, to see him daily, hourly, to watch over him sleeping and waking, to make him his plaything and companion. Against this natural desire there is the promise he has made to Linda Challice—the debt of gratitude he owes her. Hard to break that promise—hard to ignore that debt.

CHAPTER VI.

A WEDDING EVE.

THE days pass with a frightful rapidity as it seems to Sibyl after that Tuesday night on which Joel Pilgrim came back from York with the marriage licence.

Stephen Trenchard is ailing, and keeps his room for the greater part of the time, but Dr. Mitsand, a most careful man in all critical cases, comes to Lancaster Lodge only once a day, and there is no hint of danger. The doctor's manner has that pleasant vivacity which suits a trifling derangement of the patient's system. He sits by the bedside and discourses upon local topics—the water company, sewage, and other agreeable subjects. On Thursday morning Sibyl lies in wait for him on the landing outside Mr. Trenchard's room.

'You do not think my uncle very ill, do you, Dr. Mitsand?' she asks, with evident anxiety, a solicitude which the kindly old doctor thinks highly

creditable to her, and which he remembers afterwards—to her disadvantage.

'Certainly not, my dear Miss Faunthorpe,' he replies, cheerily, 'there is a little prostration; our dear patient is very feeble; that is only to be expected at his time of life. There is a wonderful reserve of vigour about his constitution, exceptional recuperative power; he is all muscle and sinew—no superfluous flesh; and this, taken in conjunction with his temperate habits, would lead one to anticipate a long life. I fear his mind has been a little troubled lately. Very foolish. A man in his position should worry himself about nothing. But no doubt wealth has its responsibilities.'

'Then there is no reason for alarm?'

'Not the slightest. If there were I should call in my friend Dr. Wilmot, of Krampston, for a consultation. Your uncle's is not a life to be trifled with,' adds Dr. Mitsand, solemnly, as if the life of a millionaire were a much bigger thing in creation than the existences of the vulgar herd. 'Pray don't be uneasy, my dear young lady. And now I look at you I fear you have been fretting.

You are looking pale and fatigued. And this little hand,' as he shakes hands with her, 'is very feverish.' He lays his finger on her wrist. 'Good gracious, what a pulse! This won't do, my dear Miss Faunthorpe. Mental disturbance has been going on here. I'll send you a composing draught. You must keep yourself quiet for the next day or two, especially as you are so soon to start upon a long voyage. Your dear uncle has told me of the interesting event which is to take place next Saturday. Very sudden! On account of Mr. Pilgrim's recall to Calcutta, yes,—yes, I understand, and a very quiet wedding, your uncle's health not allowing —of course, of course. I shall take the liberty to be present in the church, in order to have the pleasure of congratulating you. I used to think our young friend Stormont was to be the happy man; and then there was some talk of your becoming mistress of the How; but you have managed to deceive us all, you see.'

'Yes, falters Sibyl, with a sickly smile.

'Don't forget to take the composing draught. Good-bye.'

Distinctly does Dr. Mitsand remember the anxious look she turns upon him as he leaves her.

'That's not a happy marriage,' he tells his daughters at luncheon, 'it's a case of hands, not hearts, my dears. All money, money, money! with these self-made men that question swallows up every other consideration.'

It is long since Redcastle has had such a delightful subject for gossip as this suddenly arranged wedding. Mrs. Chasubel has made a round of morning calls in order to tell her dear friends the startling news, and the marriage has been discussed from every point of view, the general idea being that Mr. Trenchard is a tyrant, and Sibyl the victim of his mercenary views. Mrs. Stormont's particular idea—which she imparts in confidence to everybody—is that Sibyl was devotedly attached to her dear Frederick, and that it is to prevent her eloping with Fred that Mr. Trenchard has hurried on her espousals with Joel Pilgrim.

Inexorable time, like death, advances with measured tread. It is Friday, the eve of that ill-

omened bridal, and Sibyl sits alone in her pretty morning-room—the room in which Joel found her on his return from York. She has made all her arrangements for her journey, packed her trunks, and labelled them for the steamer *Ganges*. Her own firm hand has written those labels—Mrs. Pilgrim, passenger to Calcutta, Joel looking on all the time with that ugly smile of his. One small leather bag is unlabelled, and in that Sibyl has put her little stock of trinkets, a small supply of under linen, and the marble-paper covered book containing the diary she kept at Mrs. Hazleton's. She has kept no diary at Lancaster Lodge. She is alone now, exhausted by a long morning devoted to the task of packing. Marion has been with her, pretending to help, full of exclamations and congratulations, wonderment and curiosity.

'It doesn't seem so much of a match after all,' Marion has observed candidly. 'But I suppose this Mr. Pilgrim is awfully rich, and money is what you like, Sibyl. However, I must say if I had been you I should have tried to lead Sir Wilford Cardonnel on a little further. He did seem very

much taken with you, and every one was surprised that it only ended in a flirtation. But men are such deceivers, as some one says in an old song —one foot on somewhere, and one on somewhere else, to one thing constant never.'

Sibyl has contrived to get rid of her sister a little before dinner-time. Marion is to be at the wedding, and is to officiate as sole bridesmaid, but there has not been time for her to get a new dress made, a fact which she does not omit to bewail with much lamentation.

'It's the worst apology for a wedding *I* ever heard of,' she remarks, 'but I suppose you'll recompense yourself for all this with balls and parties when you get to Calcutta.'

'Yes,' answers Sibyl, with a faint smile. 'I shall enjoy myself immensely in Calcutta.'

It is seven o'clock, a lovely summer evening, and Sibyl sits by the disordered table, scattered with books and papers. She is very pale, and there is a look of apathy in her face and attitude, as if she had abandoned all effort and surrendered herself to fate.

She is startled from this blank listlessness by the announcement of Sir Wilford Cardonnel. No visit could surprise her more than this at such a time.

'Sir Wilford told me to say that he wishes most particularly to see you alone, ma'am,' says the servant, 'he will not detain you long.'

'You had better bring him up here. Mr. Pilgrim is in the drawing-room, I suppose?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'There is not much to attract him now in this white wretched face,' thinks Sibyl, with a hurried look at the glass, which reflects the shadow of a vanished beauty.

Sir Wilford enters breathless, and evidently strongly agitated.

'My dear Miss Faunthorpe,' he says hurriedly, 'I only came home from the north this afternoon, and heard of this intended marriage. I rode over at once. Can I be of any use? You honoured me with your confidence, and I told you that if ever the hour should come when you would need a friend, you might command me. Let me be your

friend to-day. Let me stand between you and the tyranny that is being practised—let me save you from——'

'A crime! You are all that is good and generous, Sir Wilford; and if I needed help I would ask for yours. But I need none.'

'What do you mean? Your marriage is appointed for to-morrow morning. You, the wife of another man, are to be married to this Mr. Pilgrim.'

'The marriage is appointed for to-morrow, but no such marriage will take place.'

'How will you prevent it?'

'In a very simple manner. The bride will be missing.'

'You are going away?'

'Yes. I am left with but one resource—flight! I shall be far away from Redcastle at eleven o'clock to-morrow.'

'You are sure of being able to escape—sure that no coercion will be used?'

'I think not. I have acted my part carefully during the last few days, and Mr. Pilgrim be-

lieves that I am resigned to the inevitable. My trunks are all packed for India. I have labelled them with my own hands.'

'And you have made every arrangement for going away?' asks Sir Wilford, anxiously. 'You have friends to whom you can go?'

'Yes, I have made all arrangements. I have decided where to go,' replies Sibyl after a pause.

'Pray trust me,' pleads Sir Wilford, earnestly. 'Think of me no longer as your lover, but your friend only. You must need friendly counsel. Do not take any step unadvisedly. You have played a desperate game for your uncle's fortune, and, as it now turns out, a losing game. Would it not be wiser—better in every way, even at this last moment, to confess the truth to your uncle? He might forgive you. You might even retain your hold upon his affection.'

'Impossible. You do not know my uncle Trenchard as I do. I thank you for your friendship, Sir Wilford, but this is a case in which advice is useless. There is but one course open to me. It is one that I ought to have taken long

ago, perhaps—the only straight and womanly course. But I have stubbornly pursued my own plan, and the end is failure.'

'If you would only confide in me—if you would only tell me where you are going—to whom?'

'I am going to my husband.'

'Then I can say no more. I feel that you are taking the right course. If—if——' here Sir Wilford hesitates and blushes—'if you should be in want of ready money for your travelling expenses, or for any emergency which you may not now foresee, pray suffer me to be your banker. I cashed a cheque at the bank as I came up the town,' taking out a well-filled pocket-book. 'Let me lend you fifty or a hundred in small notes.'

'You are too good,' exclaims Sibyl, touched by his thoughtfulness. 'But I have money, and money's worth which will serve me abundantly. I promise that if ever I am in desperate need of help—in such need as my husband and I have known in the past—I will apply to you. I will not be too proud to be a petitioner.'

'Thanks for that promise. And now good-bye. I will not intrude upon you any longer; but if anything should happen within the next few hours—if there should be any attempt at constraint on the part of your uncle, or Mr. Pilgrim, send a messenger to me, and I will be at your side as soon as my horse can carry me; or I will stay in Redcastle to-night, if you like, at the "Coach and Horses," so as to be nearer at hand in case I am wanted.'

'Believe me, there is no occasion. If the worst comes I have but to declare my marriage.'

'Then good-bye. I will not wish that we may meet under happier circumstances, for it will be happier for me not to see you. But I do most heartily wish you every happiness Providence can bestow.'

'I am not very hopeful,' answers Sibyl, with a sigh. 'I begin to think that I flung away my chance of happiness when I tried to win fortune.'

And thus they part, Sir Wilford honestly anxious for the welfare of the woman he has loved, Sibyl touched by his devotion.

She goes down to the drawing-room presently, and finds Joel Pilgrim walking up and down in the twilight, with by no means a radiant brow.'

'You have had a visitor,' he says, frowning upon her as she enters.

'Only Sir Wilford Cardonnel, to offer me his congratulations,' she answers, lightly.

'Only your former admirer,' sneers Joel. 'I should hardly have thought he would have considered your marriage a subject for his congratulations.'

'He is more generous than you give him credit for being.'

'So it seems. I don't, as a rule, credit my acquaintance with an unlimited amount of generosity.'

They dine together *tête-à-tête*, and Sibyl seems at her brightest throughout the meal, which is conducted with the strictest ceremony, and lasts a long time. Gladly would she have escaped the weariness of Mr. Pilgrim's detested society for these last few hours, but she wishes to disarm suspicion by every means in her power, so as to leave herself free and unfettered at the last.

Her fascinations, which have stood her in such good stead with the rest of the world, seem to be wasted on Joel Pilgrim. He is gloomy and absent-minded all dinner-time, eats little, but drinks a good deal, and when Sibyl leaves him to return to the drawing-room he does not follow her with lover-like haste, but sits brooding over his wine for half an hour, and then goes straight upstairs to Stephen Trenchard's room.

Mr. Trenchard is lying on the sofa, wrapped in his dressing-gown, with all the apparatus of invalidism around him, medicine bottles, hothouse grapes, soda water on the table by his side, a fire burning on the hearth, though it is nearly midsummer, for ill-health has made the Anglo-Indian inclined to chilliness and shiverings.

He looks up with a frown as Joel enters.

'I thought you were never coming near me any more,' he says fretfully.

'I have been devoting myself to my intended bride. Such affection as she lavishes upon me deserves some return.'

'Spare that poor child your sneers. She

is much too good for you. Have you succeeded?'

'Entirely. The bank consents to discount my bills for the required amount. I have told them that I am buying an estate in this neighbourhood, and have to complete the purchase to-morrow.'

'Have they sent you the money?' asks Mr. Trenchard, eagerly.

'No. But I shall have it to-morrow morning. I have telegraphed them that the purchase is to be completed to-morrow at eleven o'clock, and so it is, only it is another kind of purchase—the purchase of a lovely wife—which is to be concluded at that hour. I shall have the money—ten notes for a thousand each—by the first post to-morrow morning.'

'I'm glad of that.'

'You are drawing the life-blood out of the concern, remember. There is very little hope of the business surviving such a withdrawal of capital.'

'Then, my dear Joel, it must go. If it were a question of capital you might have some occasion to look unhappy about it, but as I am only absorbing your superfluous credit——'

'Superfluous,' echoes Joel, derisively.

'Yes, my dear Joel, a man of your abilities should be able to extend his credit to an almost illimitable measure. The more he owes, the more reason his creditors have for upholding his credit. Debt is the most solid foundation a commercial house can be planted upon, for its pillars have their bases in other people's pockets. You're sure the bank will send the money?'

'As sure as one can be of anything in this world.'

'Remember, no money no marriage. And a telegram to my Calcutta lawyer to make short work of Pilgrim and Company.

'I understand. No quarter. Don't be uneasy. Your demands shall be met and fully satisfied.'

* * * * *

It is midnight, and Lancaster Lodge is at rest. A light still burns, as it burns all night in Mr. Trenchard's room, brighter than the ordinary lamps of a sick chamber, a light by which the invalid can read if he pleases; for Mr. Trenchard's slumbers are often disturbed, and in every night he has some

wakeful hours. Podmore, the butler, who sleeps in the room over his master's, comes down at stated intervals to give the invalid his medicine. A secondary door near the head of the bed in Mr. Trenchard's room opens on to a small landing on the back staircase leading to the servants' quarters. By this servants' staircase Podmore descends and ascends; through this door, almost hidden by the ample draperies of the tall Arabian bed, he enters and departs, noiseless as a ghost in the silent watches of the night.

Mr. Trenchard has protested more than once that he is quite well enough to look after his own medicine, and wakeful enough to take it at the appointed hours; but Dr. Mitsand has laid a stress upon the matter, and has insisted upon Podmore being responsible for the regular administration of those gentle tonics, not strong enough to hurt a baby and too mild to take effect upon the constitution of a healthy rabbit. Whereby Podmore's nights are made a burden to him from the necessity of arousing himself at certain intervals, and the ticking of his big silver watch under his pillow is as the stroke of doom.

Sibyl spends the quiet hour between midnight and one o'clock in writing to her uncle Stephen. That which she dares not tell him she finds courage to write, knowing that her letter can only reach his hands after she has left Redcastle, in all probability for ever. If he is desperately angry, as she believes he will be, she will not see his anger. If it is in his nature to forgive her, severance may help to soften his feelings and touch his heart. After all it is just possible that the hold she has obtained upon his affections is too strong to be loosened, and that love may extinguish wrath. She would have been more ready to hope this before the coming of Joel Pilgrim, but she fancies that his presence under that roof has changed her uncle's feelings towards her, that as Joel's influence has increased hers has grown less.

In that letter she tells Stephen Trenchard the true story of her marriage—tells how from utter destitution, with starvation staring her in the face she fled to him for shelter and comfort. Of her hope of inheriting his fortune she says nothing, but her story in all other respects is fully and truthfully told.

'When I first came beneath your roof,' she writes, 'I hoped to be able some day to tell you of my marriage, to win your pity and regard for my husband; but when I discovered your rooted hatred of his name and race, when I found how deeply the old wound still rankled, I lost courage and kept my secret, at the hazard of seeming the worst of deceivers should you ever discover the truth.

'The hour has come when I can keep my secret no longer. I go out into the world to seek my husband, to share his home, however humble or however wretched. If you can bring yourself to forgive me, if you can believe that I have been grateful for all your goodness, as Heaven knows I have been, if you can take the more generous view of all past wrongs and extend your kindness to the guiltless son of your enemy, it shall need but one word to bring me back to you.

'Your grateful and dutiful niece,

'SIBYL SECRETAN.'

She feels a thrill of joy and pride as she signs her own rightful name for the first time since she

left her husband. Even in this hour of uncertainty —the wide world, so cruel to unprotected poverty, all before her—she is glad that the mask has been thrown aside, and that she is her honest self once more.

She addresses the letter to Stephen Trenchard in a bold, firm hand, and places it conspicuously on the mantelpiece of her little sitting-room, where it must be seen by the first person who enters the room next morning.

'I have played my game and lost!' she thinks, as she lies down for a few hours, if possible to rest, sleep she knows to be impossible. 'If I had won I wonder whether success would ever have recompensed me for all I have suffered from the bitterness of an acted lie—for the many hours in which I have pretended to be happy with a gnawing pain at my heart?'

CHAPTER VII.

THE PASSING-BELL.

ABOUT half-past nine o'clock on that Saturday morning which has been talked of as Sibyl Faunthorpe's wedding day, Redcastle is disturbed by a sound of ill omen. No blithe marriage peal rings out on the soft summer air, but the slow and solemn passing-bell tolls dismally from the minster tower, and strikes on every heart with its grim reminder of mortality. Let that bell sound as often as it will, it carries always the same message, and something less or more than mortal must be the ear which can hear its direful note with indifference. Before the day is old, Redcastle has subject-matter for the talk of a year. Wonder, curiosity, and an atmosphere of excitement pervade the town. Business, if not suspended, is performed in an absent-minded, perfunctory manner. People group themselves in doorways, hang over counters, lounge in public-house

bars, gather at the street corners, and there is but one name in every mouth, and that name is Trenchard.

A name worn no more upon earth—a name that is a name, and nothing more henceforward. It is no longer the docket of humanity, but a mere collection of letters to be engraven on a tombstone.

Stephen Trenchard is dead. He was found dead in his bed, at nine o'clock this morning, by the expectant bridegroom, who went to his room at that hour to wake him, and found him locked in a slumber for which earth has no key.

'Very sudden!' exclaims Redcastle. 'We knew that the dear old gentleman was ailing, but we did not expect this. At his age, though, of course, life is precarious, the thread worn to attenuation, easily snapped. How about the old gentleman's will? And is Miss Faunthorpe sole heiress?'

'That will not be known till after the funeral,' says Redcastle, 'and we must languish for some days in suspense.'

'How does Miss Faunthorpe take it?' asks Redcastle, 'and Mr. Pilgrim? The match between those two will be off now, most likely. A sad loss for the gentleman, a happy escape for the lady. She will marry Sir Wilford Cardonnel after all, perhaps, and take a leading position in the county. How uncertain is life! How wonderful are the ways of Providence!'

Mrs. Stormont and Mrs. Groshen send out their pages for black-edged note-paper of superfine quality, and rather deeper than the usual complimentary mourning, and pen elaborate letters of condolence, interlarded with appropriate quotations from the Scriptures. The silver cord and the golden bowl are brought out, with various other similes, which, by much use or misuse, have been, as it were, dragged in the gutter of commonplace composition.

'I will venture to call to-morrow, my sweet friend,' concludes Mrs. Stormont, 'to mingle my tears with yours. I hope you will feel equal to seeing me. Poor Fred is broken down with grief at the thought of what you must suffer.'

Inside Lancaster Lodge there is confusion worse than death. Dr. Mitsand has been summoned to the death-chamber, not at Joel Pilgrim's bidding. What can a doctor do for the dead? Mr. Pilgrim has asked contemptuously. The best of them can do little enough for the living. It is Mrs. Skinner, the housekeeper, who has sent for Dr. Mitsand. Podmore is helpless and useless on this awful morning. He sits in his pantry stricken, as if the blow had stupefied him.

The blinds are down in Stephen Trenchard's room as they are throughout the darkened house, but Joel, who has wandered in and out of the room while the last offices have been performed for the dead, has flung the windows wide open to the warm June morning, and the scent of the roses floats in from the garden below, mingled with the more subtle perfume of blossoming limes.

Dr. Mitsand had started on his morning rounds when the messenger was sent for him, and it is noon when he calls at Lancaster Lodge.

Joel receives him in the study, grave, sorrowful of countenance, but tranquil.

'This is a sad event, Dr. Mitsand,' he says.

'Not more sad than it is unintelligible, Mr. Pilgrim,' answers the doctor. 'There was not the slightest indication of a fatal termination to Mr. Trenchard's illness when I saw him yesterday—nothing to alarm the most anxious of medical men.'

'Something wrong about the heart, I suppose,' suggests Joel.

'We shall see if it was that.'

'You mean——'

'I mean that this is a case which calls for an inquest. You would have no objection, I suppose? As Mr. Trenchard's intended son-in-law, I naturally regard you as in some manner a member of his family.'

'Why should I object? But it is rather out of the usual course, is it not, to hold an inquest upon a man who has been in failing health for a long time, and whose death, although sudden, may be taken as the natural termination of his illness?'

'I beg your pardon. Death comes too soon and too suddenly to be taken as a natural termination here. I am as much surprised at Mr. Trenchard's

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death as if I had left him yesterday in robust health. I gave Miss Faunthorpe my positive assurance that there was no danger, or likelihood of danger in her uncle's condition. Poor young lady! The blow will be a terrible one for her. How does she bear it?'

'That is a question I cannot answer, for I have not seen her to-day. She went out this morning before breakfast—indeed, before any of the servants were up—and has not come in yet.'

'That is very strange. This was to have been her wedding day.'

'It was.'

'And she leaves the house before the servants are up, and does not appear again? It is now between twelve and one.'

'It is strange, but true.'

Dr. Mitsand is evidently disturbed by this intelligence.

'Pardon me, Mr. Pilgrim, if I say something not quite agreeable to you,' he says after a pause, 'but was there no coercion used on the subject of this marriage? It was arranged rather suddenly, and we

in Redcastle had an idea that Miss Faunthorpe's affections were engaged in another direction. When I spoke to this poor young lady the day before yesterday, I certainly perceived indications of mental disturbance. She was feverish, unduly excited, her appearance haggard, her eyes sunken. Did she freely consent to this marriage, Mr. Pilgrim? Were you and she on good terms?'

'On the best possible terms. Ask Podmore, who waited upon us at dinner yesterday when we dined *tête-à-tête*.'

'Then you can imagine no reason for what I may call Miss Faunthorpe's disappearance?'

'None whatever. Her trunks are packed for our Indian journey. She directed them with her own hands. I do not say that the alliance was a love match on her part, as it was on mine. But she knew that I was devoted to her, that her uncle had set his heart upon our marriage, and she was quite reconciled to the idea.'

'I am glad to hear that; for I was inclined to fear that her wandering away at such an early hour this morning might be the result of mental disturb-

ance—the mind thrown off its balance by extreme distress. She left the house before any one knew of her uncle's death, you say?'

'She certainly left the house before I knew of it,' answers Joel, gravely.

'And before it was known to any of the household?'

'Yes. She was gone when the servants went downstairs to open the house. They found the chain and bolts of the front door unfastened.'

'The lodgekeeper must have let her out.'

'No; she must have gone out by a door in the garden wall which opens into the lane that divides Sir John Boldero's grounds from these. The door is locked on the inside, and the key hangs on a nail beside the door. This door was found to be unlocked and the key left in the lock.'

'Very deliberate,' says Dr. Mitsand; 'but lunatics and sleep-walkers are wonderfully deliberate in their actions. The mind travels in a certain groove, but it goes steadily enough in that groove.'

The doctor's impression is that Sibyl, urged into an uncongenial marriage, has been goaded into a

state of temporary derangement. That is the theory by which he explains her extraordinary absence.

'This poor girl may be wandering about the country,' he exclaims, 'and may come to harm. Have you made no attempt to find her?'

'No. I have had enough to think about in the awful event of this morning. Until an hour or so ago I thought it possible that Miss Faunthorpe had gone to her uncle Robert's. She might have something to say to her sisters, I thought, on so eventful a morning. It was only when Marion came here at ten o'clock, expecting to find Sibyl, that I began to take alarm. And even then my mind was too much occupied to realize——'

'I understand. I sympathize with you, my dear sir,' cries the good-natured doctor. 'But I feel really concerned for this poor girl. For the dead we can do but little. Science will enable us to establish the cause of death, but beyond that last duty there is, alas! nothing. But for the living we must be active. I should recommend you to send in every direction you can think of to search for Miss Faunthorpe, and to communicate with the police. With a mind

thrown off its balance, one knows not what may happen. There is always the fear of a suicidal tendency.'

'True,' says Joel Pilgrim, with a gloomy look which may mean fear, love, anxiety, or anything else, but which certainly indicates a mind ill at ease. 'I will go down to the police office at once. I will send some of the servants to look for her.'

'One word before you go. Tell me how and when you discovered our poor friend's decease.'

'At nine o'clock in the morning. Podmore had gone to him at four to give him his medicine, and had left him sleeping tranquilly. I came down to breakfast at eight, breakfasted alone, and at nine went upstairs to take my friend his letters, and to ask his advice about a business letter which the post had brought me. I knocked at his door—no answer; knocked again, and louder—the same result. This alarmed me at once, for I knew him to be a light sleeper. I ran downstairs to the hall, called Podmore, and went up the back stairs with him to the other door of Mr. Trenchard's room, a door always left unlocked to admit Podmore, who, as you

know, has valeted his master of late. We went in, and found Mr. Trenchard lying to all appearance in a quiet sleep, but it was the sleep of death.'

'No sign of a struggle, no disturbance of the features?'

'None.'

'Very mysterious. There was nothing amiss with the heart; no organic disease of any kind. I have used the stethoscope frequently since the bronchial tubes have been a little irritated. There never was a sounder organization.'

'You would like to see him?' says Joel, interrogatively.

'Immediately.'

The doctor goes upstairs to that darkened room where the master of Lancaster Lodge takes his last rest amidst the warm breath of roses and limes. Every chair and table has been set in its place; every fold of drapery straightened by methodical hands; every species of litter—newspapers, medicine bottles, forgotten flowers left to wither in their vases—all the familiar rubbish of every-day existence has been cleared away—the chamber is

funereal as death itself—mathematically exact as the tomb.

Dr. Mitsand goes in alone, and remains there for about ten minutes. He comes out again looking very grave—nay, even troubled, like a man who has something on his mind—something heavier than that professional burden of a patient's death which a family doctor is called upon to carry so often that he acquires the knack of supporting his load easily. He finds Joel Pilgrim waiting for him on the broad landing outside—landing glorified by the bust of somebody with a sunken nose, and no pupils to his eyes, staring steadily into space.

'He looks very peaceful, doesn't he?' asks Joel, in a subdued voice.

'Very.'

'His end must have been painless, I should think.'

'It must have been instantaneous, Mr. Pilgrim. I am sure of that.'

'The heart,' suggests Joel.

'No, sir. The heart was as sound as mine—or sounder. It is not a case of heart disease.'

'Of what then?'

'The inquest will tell us that.'

'You still hold to the necessity of an inquest.'

'More than ever.'

'Will you tell me why?' Joel inquires thoughtfully, smoothing down his silky moustache with a plump tawny hand.

'Yes, when the inquest is over.'

Joel looks searchingly at the doctor's face, but it tells him nothing. The Greek philosopher—Truth's first martyr—on the landing does not present a more complete blankness of expression than Dr. Mitsand offers to Joel's observation.

'Oh, by the way,' says Dr. Mitsand, 'that is the door of Miss Faunthorpe's sitting-room, is it not?'

'Yes. That is the room she generally uses of a morning.'

'I should like to look round before we go downstairs. There might be something which would suggest the motive of her absence—a letter perhaps. You have not been in that room this morning?'

'No.'

'Nor the servants?'

'Yes, some one must have been in to draw down the blinds.'

'True. Unless the blinds were down last night. They would be most likely. But I suppose the housemaid would arrange the room this morning in the common course of things?'

'Naturally.'

Dr. Mitsand opens the door and goes in, followed by Joel. The room has been dusted and arranged by the housemaid, but the table near the window, covered with books, workboxes and feminine trifles of various kinds, remains just as Sibyl left it the night before. It is one of Sibyl's laws that this table shall not be touched. There is to be no tidying or arranging of the trifles she values—her books, her writing materials, her fancy work.

The doctor's eye surveys the pretty little room. The sunshine is shut out by the lowered venetians, but there is light enough for him to see everything.

'I thought she might have left a letter somewhere,' says Dr. Mitsand. 'That is what young ladies generally do when they run away from home.'

'We have no right to suppose that she has run away,' observes Joel.

'True. Yet it looks rather like it.'

He has looked at the mantelpiece, at the cabinet with its upholsterer's collection of pink and blue Sèvres teacups, the inevitable Marie Antoinette,—the eternal De Maintenon, the everlasting Pompadour, smirking behind plate-glass panels. No, there is no letter on cabinet or mantelpiece. He goes to the table, glances at the books, the dainty basket lined with rose-coloured satin, the shreds of lace, and ivory needle-cases and filigree thimble-boxes. Still no letter. How intently he examines all these trifles, peers into the basket, raises the lid of the workbox, always looking for that letter!

He comes upon something presently that engages his particular attention, but it is not a letter, only a glass phial corked and empty, nestling in the satin-lined basket among needle-cases and reels of cotton.

'Dilute prussic acid,' he says, sniffing at the cork cautiously. 'That's curious.'

Joel watches him closely.

'Very curious,' echoes Joel, 'but I believe young women sometimes use it for their complexions, don't they?'

'No. I've heard of their using arsenic, never prussic acid in any form. Miss Faunthorpe may have been taking the dilute acid as a sedative. I'll take care of the bottle. She ought not to leave such things about.'

'But an empty bottle can do no harm,' says Joel.

'Perhaps not, but I may as well keep it. You'll remember where we found this bottle, Mr. Pilgrim,' says Dr. Mitsand, as he drops the empty phial into his pocket.

'Perhaps you will kindly call at the Registrar's and certify my poor friend's death,' says Mr. Pilgrim. 'Podmore tells me there is some kind of certificate necessary in these cases.'

'It is just that certificate which I do not feel myself at liberty to give until after the inquest,' replies the doctor.

'Why not?'

'Because I do not know the cause of death.'

'But the arrangements for the funeral——'

'Must remain in abeyance till after the inquest.'

'Very unpleasant,' says Joel.

'Yes, death is apt to be unpleasant for the survivors, especially under certain circumstances,' replies Dr. Mitsand, gravely.

He leaves Joel, and goes straight to the coroner, his old friend and ally, a medical man who has retired from practice, and the two talk together gravely of the event that has darkened the windows of Lancaster Lodge. It is decided between them that the post-mortem examination shall take place immediately, and that, if possible, Mr. Pollintory, of Krampston, shall be ready to give evidence to-morrow at the inquest. The coroner gives an order for the post-mortem examintaion, and Dr. Mitsand writes a telegram to Mr. Pollintory, one of the medical staff of the Krampston Infirmary, a skilled chemist and analyst, and a man of some distinction in his own particular line.

CHAPTER VIII.

DARK SURMISES.

In the old house at the lower end of the town there is surprise and agitation, and a flutter of excitement which throws all the machinery of life out of gear. Hester leaves her dishes unwashed, and sits down in her disorderly kitchen to talk over Mr. Trenchard's death with the charwoman. They talk immensely, though they know hardly anything about the dread event, save such jetsam and flotsam of intelligence, chiefly false, as has been cast up on the shore of the High Street. But they evolve a great deal out of their inner consciousness. They speculate upon that ever-interesting subject, the will, and argue for and against Sibyl's appointment as sole heiress.

'It will be an unjust will if he's left everything to her,' says Hester, vindictively.

'Ah, but she was the favourite, you see,' pleads the charwoman, tilting her bonnet on to her eyebrows in her animation, 'and so pretty, and such winning

'ways with her. I shouldn't wonder if all the money was left to her.'

'Then I hope she'll remember my poor old master, and all he's done for her and her sisters,' says Hester. 'They might all have gone to the workhouse if it hadn't been for him. Mr. Trenchard was across the seas and couldn't help 'em, and many a good meal Dr. Faunthorpe's gone without to bring up three hearty-eating girls.'

'I dare say Miss Faunthorpe will take her uncle to live with her at Lancaster Lodge,' says the charwoman. 'Such a lovely place! I went in one evening that there was a dinner party, to help the kitchenmaid wash up. Why, the very scullery's ekal to some people's drawring-rooms!'

'Dr. Faunthorpe ain't going to live there, you may depend,' replies Hester, decisively. 'He don't want none of your finery. He likes his own house and his independence, and his water cake and bit of smoked bacon for breakfast.'

'It's odd Miss Faunthorpe being out this morning, when her sister went up,' speculates the charwoman.

'Yes, that's odd. It's my belief she was always against this Mr. Pilgrim, and her uncle had forced the marriage upon her, and she went off this morning to some of her fine friends to get out of the way. Them Cardonnels, perhaps, that she and Miss Marion was visiting at Christmas.'

'Ah, they do say she might have married Sir Wilford Cardonnel if she'd liked,' says the charwoman.

'Of course she could,' answers Hester, glad to exalt the family she has served so faithfully. 'Only she's as full of fancies as an egg's full of meat, and she wouldn't have him.'

While this discussion goes on in the kitchen, Marion and Jenny sit in the parlour, occupied by all-absorbing thoughts of the dead man's will and their own mourning. They have not liked Stephen Trenchard well enough to feel any regret for his loss; nay, his death is an event to which they have looked forward as a turning-point—the beginning of brighter days—in their own lives. He is dead, and a painful interval of suspense must be endured before they can know what he has done for them.

They are hopeful meanwhile, and wildly speculative—especially Jenny, whose ideas ramble among thousands and tens of thousands as they have never rambled before, save in the agreeable mazes of an arithmetic book.

'You see he had such oceans of money,' argues Jenny. 'He could afford to make Sibyl a great heiress, and to leave us twenty thousand apiece quite easily. And the interest of twenty thousand pounds is a thousand a year. Uncle Robert told me so. Fancy you and me with a thousand a year each! No stocking-darning, no turning and twisting our winter dresses to make them do for spring. I shall go into long skirts immediately.'

'That will be a boon to the rest of humanity, for they'll hide your legs,' replies Marion.

'Shall you have crape tucks or flounces on your black silk?' inquires Jenny, recurring to that inexhaustible topic, the mourning.

'Whichever is the last fashion. Miss Eylett shall make our mourning, and she always has the newest style.'

'But we ought to have dresses ready for the day

of the funeral,' says Jenny. 'And how can we get them before the will is read? We don't know whether we're heiresses or beggars.'

'Carmichael's people will let us have anything we want,' replies Marion. 'Depend upon it they'll give us any amount of credit now uncle Trenchard is dead. They know we must come in for some of his money.'

As the day goes on the fever of curiosity and wonder which has seized upon Redcastle is intensified, for the flame is fed by new revelations of a startling character. First there is the news of Sibyl's disappearance; and then it becomes known somehow that there is to be a post-mortem examination, followed by a coroner's inquest. This is really interesting, and would distinguish the deceased from the common ruck even if he had not been a millionaire. The two local papers are in a flutter of excitement, and rival reporters hang about Lancaster Lodge and question the respectable Podmore, whose large pale face—in shape and expression somewhat resembling the station clock—assumes a troubled and bewildered look.

From the coroner's house Dr. Mitsand goes on to his brother practitioner, Dr. Faunthorpe. That meek little man has just returned from a long round in his dilapidated chaise, and has 'run in,' as he calls it, to get a little bit of dinner. Regularly to dine is a luxury unknown to the parish doctor. The cloth is laid in the homely parlour, the remains of joint or stew are kept in the oven, with a potato or two simmering in greasy gravy, and the doctor takes his repast hurriedly and alone an hour or two after the appointed dinner-hour.

He has just seated himself at his savoury mess, when Hester enters mysteriously and announces Dr. Mitsand.

'I've shown him into the best parlour,' she says, whereupon Dr. Faunthorpe, faint with hunger, reluctantly lays down his knife and fork, and goes to receive his guest.

'What can he want with me?' he thinks.

Dr. Mitsand explains himself briefly.

'The coroner has ordered me to make a post-mortem examination, assisted by Mr. Pollintory—you know Pollintory, of course; and I thought you

ought to be present, as a near connection of the deceased,' he concludes.

'I am surprised that a post-mortem should be thought necessary,' says Dr. Faunthorpe, fluttered by this intelligence. 'There was nothing mysterious in my brother-in-law's death, I hope. He had been ailing for some time.'

'He had; but his death was not the less unexpected. It is always best to err on the side of caution. By the way, may I ask if you use much prussic acid in your practice?'

The question startles the meek little doctor, and he looks at the inquirer with a perplexed expression of countenance.

'I have used it occasionally, but not often.'

'You keep some in your surgery, no doubt?'

'Yes, I have a little of the diluted acid.'

'You are careful to keep it out of harm's way, I suppose. It is not within any one's reach?' inquires Dr. Mitsand.

'I keep that and all poisons on a top shelf, in blue bottles. They could not possibly be used in mistake for anything else, if that is what you mean.

'I am glad of that.'

'But what has this to do with Mr. Trenchard's death?' asks Dr. Faunthorpe, with a troubled look.

'Only this much. From the indications presented by the body after death—a livid hue—the nails purple—the hands so firmly clenched that the women who laid out the dead have not been able to place them in a peaceful attitude—and from the odour of the room where he lies, I have too much reason to fear that Mr. Trenchard died poisoned by prussic acid. This calls for immediate investigation.'

'Great Heaven, yes!' cries Dr. Faunthorpe, white with horror. 'But how do you imagine the poison administered? Whom can you suspect?'

'I suspect no one as yet. The least painful supposition is that he took the poison himself.'

'Why should he do that? What motive had he for committing suicide? Or what motive could any one have had for murdering him?'

'Hard to imagine a motive in either case. Unless it were possible that some one who expected to profit by his death was tempted to hasten that death by poison.'

'Dr. Mitsand,' exclaims Robert Faunthorpe, tremulous with indignant horror, 'are you aware that my eldest niece is the person who had most expectation to be a gainer by her uncle Trenchard's death?'

'I know that.'

'And you come to ask me whether I keep any form of prussic acid in my surgery—you suspect that the poison by which Mr. Trenchard died—or by which you suppose him to have died—was taken from this house?'

'I tell you that I suspect nothing, Dr. Faunthorpe. But until the law has taken this painful business into its own hands, it is my duty to act in the interests of law and right. Mr. Trenchard was in my care. He dies, as I believe, foully murdered. Your niece disappears on the day of his death.'

'She runs away to escape a marriage which we may fairly suppose had been forced upon her by Mr. Trenchard.'

'That is one view of the case—and I hope the right one. Yet her absence cannot fail to prejudice the minds of those who have to investigate this

matter. If you have any idea where she is, I should recommend you to communicate with her, and urge her immediate return.'

'I have no idea. She had no friends before she was adopted by her rich uncle. She may have gone to some of her new friends, but they are unknown to me. I don't know where to look for her, or how to communicate with her.'

'It is a most unhappy case, Dr. Faunthorpe, but you and I must do our duty.'

'My poor Sibyl—my poor unhappy girl—to be the subject of such a horrible suspicion!' cries Dr. Faunthorpe, helplessly.

He sits alone for some time after Dr. Mitsand has left him, sits hopeless and stricken. It is not that he believes his niece guilty of this hideous crime—this almost impossible wickedness,—but that the mere suspicion should have fallen upon her is a calamity that bows him to the dust.

At four o'clock that bright summer afternoon the three medical men meet at Lancaster Lodge for their dismal work. Podmore, with his large round face, still white and horror-stricken, admits them into the

dusky silence of the hall. Joel Pilgrim comes out of the study to receive them, very calm and business-like in manner, and leads the way to the room where the dead man lies. At the door he leaves them, and goes quietly downstairs to his retreat in the study, where he sits reading the paper—or making believe to read it.

In the room upstairs the dismal work is performed in silence.

To Mr. Pollintory, the skilful analyst, it is no more than an every-day matter of business. A jar is sealed in the presence of the three medical men, and this vessel Mr. Pollintory is to take back to Krampston with him, there to perform his analysis, and apply tests scientific and physiological, in the retirement of his own laboratory.

But in the minds of those three men analysis is hardly needed to establish the one fatal fact that Stephen Trenchard has been poisoned by prussic acid. In the appearances which add to the awfulness of death, in the odour which exhales from that lifeless form, there is evidence enough of a technical kind to convince a whole college of physicians.

The doctors go quietly downstairs when their work is done, and again Mr. Pilgrim appears at the study door.

'Well, gentlemen?' he exclaims interrogatively, 'What is your verdict? Do you find the cause of death in the heart or brain?'

'In neither,' replies Dr. Mitsand.

'What then?'

'I had rather not state my opinion till I am called upon at the inquest to-morrow.'

'Humph,' mutters Joel. 'You doctors like to be mysterious. It is a trick of the trade. But pray walk in, gentlemen, you will take some refreshment after your painful task, I hope.'

Dr. Mitsand and his colleagues decline this proffered entertainment.

'I should like to ask a few questions of the butler before we go,' says Dr. Mitsand. 'I believe it was he who last saw Mr. Trenchard alive.'

'To the best of my knowledge it was so, answers Joel, scraping his smooth chin thoughtfully, 'But Podmore is a very stupid fellow, and this sad event seems to have thrown him quite off his

balance. The man has no self-possession whatever. You'll not get a succinct account from him.'

'I don't want an account. I only want an answer to a question or two,' replies Dr. Mitsand. 'Be kind enough to ring for him, Mr. Pilgrim.'

Joel obeys. Poor little Dr. Faunthorpe sits in a corner meanwhile, pale as a sheet of letter-paper, and full of vague apprehensions. That Stephen Trenchard has either destroyed himself or been foully murdered there can be no doubt. Which is it? And why is Sibyl absent?

Podmore appears in answer to the bell, and by his aspect fully justifies Joel's account of him. He looks from one of the doctors to the other with a countenance full of apprehension.

"You gave Mr. Trenchard his medicine at four o'clock this morning?' inquires Dr. Mitsand.

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you find him in his usual health?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You noticed nothing particular in his manner?'

'No, sir—unless——'

'Speak out, pray.'

'He might have been a little more irritable than usual, perhaps. He had been rather irritable for some time past. Mr. Pilgrim may have noticed it.'

Joel nods acquiescence.

'As if he had something on his mind,' suggests Dr. Mitsand.'

'Well, yes, sir. You might take it that way.'

'Who removed the glasses and bottles from Mr. Trenchard's room this morning? Was it one of the women-servants?'

'No, sir. Mr. Pilgrim told me to see to clearing the room. The women-servants were timid about going in.'

'What did you do with the glass in which your master was in the habit of taking potash water?'

'I took it down to the pantry with the rest of the things, sir, and washed it with my other glasses.'

'You are sure you washed it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you think you could find me that particular glass?'

'I might perhaps, sir. It was a large soda water glass. There's a dozen of the same pattern in the

pantry. They're kept on the same shelf; but I think I should know the one Mr. Trenchard used last from the position of it.'

'Bring it then,' says Joel, authoritatively.

Podmore shuffles out, and returns presently with the glass. Dr. Mitsand takes it to the window, and examines it with his back to Joel and the rest.

'You wash your glasses in very hot water, I think,' he says to Podmore.

'Pretty hot, sir. And I use a bit of soda to keep them bright.'

'I see. Was there a table with glasses and bottles on it within reach of your master's hand as he lay in bed?'

'No, sir.'

'Nonsense, Podmore!' cries Joel, quickly. 'You forget the little table which Mr. Trenchard had placed close to his bed a few days ago, in order that he might help himself to a bottle of potash water if he wanted it without ringing for you.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' stammers Podmore. 'Yes, I forgot the little table; my master had it put handy to his hand, as you may say.

But it didn't use to be there, and it slipped my memory.'

'And was it from that table you took this soda-water glass?'

'Yes, sir.'

'That will do,' says Dr. Mitsand, and Podmore shuffles out again, escaping gladly as a soul released from torment.

'If I could understand any motive for such an act,' says Dr. Mitsand, as he and his colleagues go along the shrubberied drive between Lancaster Lodge and its gates, 'I should be inclined to believe that that man poisoned his master. I never saw a more craven hound. We shall see if he comes in for an annuity, or a handsome legacy, under his master's will.'

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE SURGERY.

THAT speech of Dr. Mitsand's about Podmore awakens hope in Robert Faunthorpe's breast. If there has been murder done, if Stephen Trenchard has not been in some distracted hour his own destroyer, this man is surely more likely to have been the murderer than any one else under that roof. He has had access to his master at all hours of the night—in those silent hours when the rest of the household has been locked in sleep. He may have stolen the plate, made away with the valuables committed to his charge, and may have been tempted to make away with his master in order to escape the punishment of his dishonesty. Or he may have known himself to be a legatee under his master's will, and may have done this foul deed to expedite fortune. So Dr. Faunthorpe reasons with himself during his dismal homeward walk.

Marion and Jenny are sitting in the parlour at work when he goes in. The tea-tray still adorns the table.

'How white and tired you look, uncle!' exclaims Marion. 'You'd like some tea, wouldn't you? I've saved the teapot.'

'Thank you, my dear. I'll take a cup of tea,' says the doctor faintly. He sinks into a chair with a weary sigh. His parish patients have been neglected to-day, and conscience pricks him. They will be coming presently, poor things, with their burns and scalds, and boils, and whitlows, and festers, and all that variety of thorns in the flesh to which poverty is subject, and he will have to brace his nerves and attend to them. But for the moment he feels prostrate.

Marion shakes the teapot vigorously, and pours out a liquid not very unlike that infusion of senna which the parish patients consume by the pailful.

'There, uncle, that 'll do you good. Run to the kitchen, Jenny, and get the hot cake we saved for uncle Robert;' and Jenny rushes off and returns

swiftly with a crisp and greasy bannock, which the doctor is wont to enjoy above all other delicacies.

'Any news of Sibyl?' asks Marion.

'No, my dear,' sighs the doctor.

'Strange, isn't it?' exclaims Marion.

'Very strange, my dear. I begin to feel very uneasy about your poor sister. What could have induced her to take such a step? At such a time too!'

'Just at the time when she ought to have been thinking about her mourning,' says Marion.

'I hope she hasn't committed suicide,' cries Jenny, with a strangled sob.

'Jane,' exclaims the doctor, severely, 'I am shocked at your suggesting anything so dreadful. Your sister is a Christian, I hope.'

'Of course, but she might have been unhappy, poor thing. I dare say she detested that horrid Mr. Pilgrim, and uncle Trenchard tried to force her into marrying him, and then perhaps she got frightened and miserable, and was driven to p—p—poison herself,' concludes Jenny with a burst of sobs.

The little doctor starts in his chair as if he had been shot, and puts down his cup and saucer with a trembling hand.

'How dare you say such things, Jane?' he demands, severely. He is very angry when he calls his youngest niece Jane. 'How dare you mention such a thing as poison in connection with your sister's name? Where should she get poison, I should like to know? How should she get it?'

'If—if she wanted it very badly she might get it in the surgery,' whimpers Jenny.

'Not without my knowledge. I have forbidden every one in this house to touch a single bottle in my surgery.'

'Yes, uncle,' falters Jenny, recalling the many half-hours in which she has diverted herself with those very bottles; 'but if Sibyl wanted anything very badly, some laudanum for the toothache, for instance, and you happened to be out at the time, she might not stand upon—what's its name?'

'What is the girl driving at?' cries Marion, in a disgusted tone.

'What do you mean, Jenny?' says Dr. Faunthorpe, nervously. 'If there is anything in your knowledge that I ought to be told, speak out, and for God's sake speak only the truth to me, and hold your tongue to all the rest of the world about it,—and you too, Marion. This is more serious than either of you can imagine.'

'Sibyl had the toothache one afternoon when she was here—about a fortnight or three weeks ago, perhaps,—or she had been having the toothache very badly, she said, and couldn't get any sleep, and she wanted some laudanum.'

'Laudanum?' cries Dr. Faunthorpe, relieved. 'Is that all?'

'Yes, but laudanum's poison, isn't it, uncle Robert, if you take enough of it? I told her where the laudanum was kept, and she got up on thestep-ladder and took some in a little bottle out of one of your drawers. But there was one thing that struck me as very mysterious.'

'What was that?'

'Does laudanum ever smell of bitter almonds?'

'No, child!' cries the doctor, with a start.

'Well, then, this did, ever so strong. The smell of it made me feel quite queer. But Sibyl declared it was laudanum, and that my smell must be all wrong.'

'But you would know opium, surely, a dark brown liquid?'

'Yes, but I didn't see this. Sibyl had her back towards me while she was filling the little bottle. I only smelt it. When I asked her to show me the bottle, she refused, and called me a stupid. But I'm positive it smelt of bitter almonds; and Sibyl looked quite pale and faint afterwards, as if the smell had upset her too.'

'Can this be true?' cries the doctor, profoundly agitated.

'Pray don't put yourself out of the way about it, uncle,' exclaims Marion, soothingly. 'Sibyl might have taken all the poisons in the surgery, and no harm need come of it. She's a great deal too fond of herself and her pretty looks to commit suicide. I dare say she's with her grand friends at the How, flirting with Sir Wilford Cardonnel, and enjoying herself ever so.'

'But if she were at the How she would have heard of Mr. Trenchard's death by this time.'

'I don't know about that.'

'I must send to the How. I must send to every place where is a chance of finding her. It is most vital that she should return without delay.'

'Yes,' says Marion. 'She ought to see about her mourning; and if she is to be uncle Trenchard's chief heiress it certainly looks queer for her to be out of the way at such a time.'

Dr. Faunthorpe sighs and says no more. The bell rings at this moment, and he goes to his surgery to see a parish patient, who has brought the latest variety in scalds for his inspection. A whitlow drops in five minutes afterwards, followed by an interesting case of enlarged glands wrapped in flannel, after which comes a promising whooping-cough, and on the heels of that a very fair specimen of incipient measles. These occupy Dr. Faunthorpe till nine o'clock, and he has but just dismissed the measles with a comforting dose of senna when a bell rings sharply—not the surgery bell this time. He is standing in the passage when it rings, and he

opens the door himself, and admits a respectable-looking stranger, of business-like aspect and middle age.

'Dr. Faunthorpe, I believe?'

'Yes, I am Dr. Faunthorpe.'

'Can I have a few words with you in your surgery?'

'A patient,' thinks the doctor, as he ushers the visitor into his stuffy den, heated like an oven by the gas, and odorous with senna and peppermint.

'I may as well come straight to business, Dr. Faunthorpe,' says the stranger directly the door is shut. 'You were present at the post-mortem this afternoon, and you know that Mr. Trenchard has been poisoned with prussic acid. My name is Judbury, and I belong to the Krampston police force. I am sent here by our chief to look into this business. My duty is to find out where that prussic acid was bought. Now, before I go to the chemists shops, Dr. Faunthorpe, I want to know if it came out of your surgery, as there is reason to suppose it did.'

'What reason can there be to suppose any such thing?'

'Never you mind that. You'll be summoned to appear at the inquest to-morrow, and you'll be asked certain questions, I dare say. I want to see your bottle of dilute prussic acid.'

'Suppose I tell you that I keep no such thing in my surgery?'

'Then I should have to look for myself. I've got authority to search your surgery. You'd better let me see the bottle. It 'll come to the same thing in the end.'

Very pale, and with a sinking of his heart which he has never felt before in all his patient life, Robert Faunthorpe drags the step-ladder to the recess of the fireplace, and mounts to look for the dark blue bottle.

Mr. Judbury follows him to the steps, and eyes him as a cat eyes a mouse during the operation.

Poor Dr. Faunthorpe's hand trembles alittle as he takes down the fatal bottle, and before he can examine it Mr. Judbury's firm fingers have taken it from him.

'How much acid do you suppose you had in the bottle, sir?' asks Judbury.

'I really can't say to a nicety—it's a drug I rarely use—perhaps a matter of two ounces.'

'And there isn't an ounce here.'

'But I can't be positive,' exclaims the doctor, profoundly agitated. 'I tell you it's ever so long since I used any. I can't be called upon to state the quantity. It may have evaporated.'

'I understand. But your impression is that you had two ounces. The bottle doesn't look as if it had been disturbed lately; the dust's pretty thick upon it,' says Mr. Judbury, taking it to the gas burner and examining it closely.

'Do you see this, Dr. Faunthorpe?' he asks, pointing to the side of the dark blue bottle.

'This' is the impression of two slim fingers on the dust-whitened glass. Two streaks of blue show where two fingers have grasped the bottle.

'That's the mark of a hand, sir,' says the detective decisively, 'a woman's or a child's.'

'Jenny, my youngest niece, may have tampered with the bottle,' stammers the doctor, beside himself with fear and trouble. 'She has been forbidden to touch anything, but she's a tiresome child, and may

'Send for Miss Jenny, sir, and let us ask her all about it,' says Mr. Judbury.

Robert Faunthorpe could cut out his tongue for having uttered the girl's name. Jenny will come, and under this horrible man's cross-questioning will say something to implicate Sibyl. Horrors are thickening round this miserable house. Is this the hour they have all hoped and waited for, the hour which was to bring Stephen Trenchard's days to an end, and be the beginning of his kindred's prosperity?

Seeing the doctor hesitate, Mr. Judbury makes bold to ring the bell for himself. It is answered by Hester, looking daggers. She hates to be disturbed at her supper. It may be only bread and cheese, or the scrapings of some bone or pie dish, or the greasy remnants of hashed mutton, washed down with a mug of table beer, but she likes to eat her meal in peace.

'What is it, sir?' she asks, snappishly.

'Send Miss Jane here,' falters the doctor.

Jane comes and is questioned about the blue bottle. She fences with her questioner at first, and

looks as if the rack itself would not twist an admission of any kind out of her; but subjected to Mr. Judbury's insidious process of interrogation, she finally tells the whole story of Sibyl's coming into the surgery to get some laudanum, and the mysterious smell of bitter almonds, and the bottle which Sibyl filled and would not let her see.

'Thank you, miss,' says Judbury, approvingly. 'I think we must get you to appear before the coroner to-morrow.'

'Jane,' exclaims the doctor when Mr. Judbury had made his bow and departed, 'you have put a rope round your sister's neck.'

CHAPTER X.

STEPHEN TRENCHARD SURPRISES HIS FRIENDS.

REDCASTLE is profoundly excited next morning by the inquest which is held in the large room—a ball-room or a dining hall on festive occasions—at the 'Coach and Horses' Hotel. Whispers of foul play have floated in the air since the *post-mortem* examination at Lancaster Lodge. Sibyl's disappearance has become known, and people look at one another ominously as they mention her name. Mr. Pilgrim's behaviour in this time of trial is the admiration of everybody, the enthusiasm beginning with the firm of upholsterers and undertakers whom he entrusts with the conduct of Mr. Trenchard's obsequies, and gradually permeating the town till every one is loud in his praise. His coolness, his clearness of head, his decent grief for his departed friend, his thoughtful consideration for Sibyl, in quest of whom he has sent far and wide,—all these things entitle him to

the admiration of the town, and Redcastle does not stint its praise.

Never has the coroner sat in so crowded a court as this which he gravely contemplates to-day. Mrs. Stormont has borrowed her cook's bonnet, and put on her thickest veil, fondly feeling herself disguised by these means, when every turn of her head and every angle of her figure are as well known in Redcastle as the town pump. Mrs. Groshen is also present and thickly veiled. The two matrons have been accommodated with chairs in a quiet corner near the reporters' table, and they put their heads together, and sigh dismally, and talk of the awfulness of life and death, and the mysterious depths of wickedness in the human heart, pending the commencement of the proceedings.

The first evidence is entirely medical. Dr. Mitsand describes those appearances in the corpse which led him to conclude that Stephen Trenchard had been poisoned. Mr. Pollintory deposes to the finding of the poison in his analysis of the contents of the stomach. Dr. Mitsand describes the discovery of a phial which has contained the

diluted acid in a basket in the room usually occupied by Sibyl Faunthorpe.

Joel Pilgrim is examined as to the discovery of the death at nine o'clock on the previous morning. He is questioned as to those appearances which at once impressed Dr. Mitsand, and he owns that in the agitation consequent on the sad event he had overlooked these indications.

'You saw nothing particular in the appearance of the corpse?' inquires the coroner.

'I was too agitated to observe.'

'Yet you must have perceived the livid hue which struck Dr. Mitsand.'

'I may have perceived that. My impression was that death had been caused by an apoplectic stroke.'

'And that, in your mind, would account for the livid tinge?'

'It would.'

'Did you observe the eyes?'

'I was too agitated to observe details.'

'But you must have seen the expression of the eyes. Were they bright and glassy—staring—the pupils dilated?'

'I cannot say. I sent for the women to lay out the corpse immediately. The whole thing was too painful, too sudden, to allow of my observing particulars.'

He is questioned as to Sibyl's disappearance.

'Can you give any reason for the young lady being absent at such a time?'

'I cannot.'

'She was to have been married to you yesterday morning?'

'She was.'

'Had she given her free consent to the marriage?'

'She had.'

'I beg your pardon,' interposes a gentleman sitting at the table. 'I think these questions are quite irrelevant to the object of the inquest. The jury have only to determine the cause of death. Miss Faunthorpe's conduct is outside the question.'

Robert Faunthorpe has engaged a Krampston solicitor to watch the proceedings in his niece's interest. He has done his utmost for her in this, having an idea that the genius of Krampston

is infinitely superior to that of Redcastle, and that a Krampston lawyer must be a man of much experience and acumen.

Podmore, the butler, is examined as to his last visit to his master's room, and the state in which he left the deceased. His answers to the coroner's questions closely resemble those he made to Dr. Mitsand yesterday afternoon, but there is a thickness in his speech which offends that functionary.

'That will do, sir. This is very shameful, sir, positively disgusting. You are intoxicated.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' falters Podmore, dissolving in tears. 'You blas' my ch—ck—ar—racter, sir. I haven't touched—drop—spiriss this morr'ng. It's my feelings.'

'Go away, sir. You are drunk. I won't hear another word.'

Dr. Faunthorpe is now examined as to the abstraction of a portion of prussic acid contained in the bottle in his surgery, but the coroner can obtain no positive statement from him as to the quantity which ought to have been in the bottle.

'Come, Dr. Faunthorpe, you must have some

approximate idea as to the quantity of acid in your possession. Your books would show you when you last bought any. If your memory is so much at fault we shall have to ask to see your books.'

'It is three years at least since I bought any I may not have kept the wholesale chemist's bill. I have no record.'

'Oh, come, you must remember something about it. If you so rarely employ the acid in your medicines you must have the quantity you purchased nearly intact. Now what is the smallest quantity you have ever bought?'

'I think, about two ounces.'

'You have never bought above two ounces?'

'I do not think so.'

'Come, Dr. Faunthorpe, you are too scientific a man to think about a fact. You must know.'

And finally the coroner wrings from the reluctant witness the admission that he ordered two ounces of the diluted acid with other drugs three years ago. That he used it once as a sedative in a case of violent sickness, that he cannot remember having used it since. He admits the finding

of a bottle in his surgery last night, with only one ounce or less than one ounce of the poison. The bottle is now in the possession of the authorities.

The Krampston solicitor objects to these questions, as having no bearing on the main issue, which is simply to ascertain the cause of death, but his objections are not entertained. The coroner of Redcastle conducts his inquest with a lofty hand, and is as arbitrary as any of his mediæval predecessors.

Jane Faunthorpe is not called, much to the doctor's relief. Yet he feels that even as matters stand there is a dark cloud hanging over the head of the absent Sibyl.

'Perhaps it would be better for her never to return,' he thinks.

He has sent a messenger to The How, and has sent in other directions without avail. He can discover no trace of Sibyl. Yet Mr. Judbury is already in possession of some information upon this subject. He knows the hour at which she left Redcastle, the train by which she went, the clothes she wore, the

bag she carried. His next duty will be to discover whither she has gone.

The jury go to Lancaster Lodge to view the body. The medical evidence having settled the cause of death, this is little more than a formula, which it is indeed in many cases where investigation should be thorough.

After this, although the cause of death is sufficiently clear, the coroner suggests the adjournment of the inquiry until further evidence can be brought forward.

There is some little discussion between the coroner and one of the jury as to a convenient date for the adjourned inquiry, and Mr. Judbury, who has been present throughout the proceedings, has a few words to say upon this subject. Finally the inquest is adjourned to this day week. The funeral arrangements meanwhile may proceed.

'And the will may be read,' thinks Dr. Faunthorpe, 'and we shall know if Sibyl is the heiress. God grant she may appear without delay, and make her innocence manifest to every one.'

He goes back to his daily round of duty sorely

dejected in spirit. There is none of his parish patients, hard as may be their struggle for existence, who carries so heavy a heart this day as he who ministers to their wants. There is no rheumatism or sciatica that gripes its victim with a sharper pang than the agony which tears Robert Faunthorpe's breast when he thinks that in the minds of all his townsfolk Sibyl lies under suspicion of murder.

Meanwhile Messrs. Kabriole, the upholsterers and undertakers, are in their glory. The massive oaken coffin, glittering with brazen furniture, is in hand,—merrily rings the joiner's hammer on the stout oak. The best velvet pall is brought forth from its resting-place, aired and brushed. The big Flemish horses have their manes combed and their fetlocks clipped, and receive all the embellishment that skilful grooming can bestow. The sable plumes are shaken out, the inky cloaks unfolded, and there is quite an agreeable excitement in Messrs. Kabriole's back shop.

'I shan't be sorry to get our account in,' says Kabriole the elder to his Son and Co. 'There's a heavy amount outstanding. Mr. Trenchard was

like many of your millionaires, slow in parting with his money.'

'I should have asked him for it, father, if I was you,' suggests the son.

'Yes, and have lost a first-rate customer,' replies the senior, severely. 'Gentlemen in that position mustn't be pressed for money. The most one can do is to send in one's account at Christmas.'

'You might have had a bill to make up, or something.'

'I does that with my pettifogging customers, Joe, never with a man of Mr. Trenchard's standing. It's too 'ollow.'

'Well, the money will come handy in a lump,' remarks the son.

'Of course it will, Joe; and you must bear in mind that I charges five per cent. interest all along —and the interest gets posted up every quarter, and carries interest on the back of it. It's like putting one's money in the bank—and safer.'

'Well, you're a good 'un, father. There's no getting the right side of you.'

'I've got an 'ed for business, Joe,' answers the parent, complacently. 'I was born so.'

The days go by, but bring no tidings of Sibyl. The day of the funeral comes, a quiet funeral, but splendid. All that wealth can do to disguise the awfulness of death—or to add to it—with funeral pomp, has been done here. Mr. Kabriole watches the sable train leave his premises with a thrill of pride. Every item of that gorgeous *cortége* is already entered in his ledger. He feels that the metropolis could hardly beat this display.

'Drat your reformed funerals—with their rubbishing open cars, reminding folks of Lord Mayor's Day, or Ashley's Theayter!' exclaims the upholsterer, who has served his time to a London firm. 'Give me the good old style—the legitimate, as your playgoers say of the draymer.'

Dr. Faunthorpe, Mr. Pilgrim, Dr. Mitsand, and Colonel Stormont are the only mourners, and occupy two mourning coaches. Poor Dr. Faunthorpe weeps silently behind his handkerchief—not for the dead, for whom he cares but little, but for the living, over whom clouds lower so heavily. He feels very much

as if he were going in solemn state to his own execution. Except these tears there is but little show of grief. Dr. Mitsand and Colonel Stormont talk of the mystery of the dead man's end, but do not commit themselves to any opinion on the subject. Joel Pilgrim is silent as death itself.

A good many private carriages testify to the respect in which Stephen Trenchard has been held by his fellow-townsmen. Sir Wilford Cardonnel's family chariot follows with high stepping bays, and the coachman and footman in their last new liveries.

Solemnly toll the minster bells as the procession wends its slow and pompous way down the street. Shutters are up before almost all the shop windows —blinds are down in many places—a respectful crowd gazes in reverential silence at the spectacle.

The town of Redcastle bears witness that it has lost a benefactor.

However solemnly performed, that service of the Church which remits dust to dust is not a long one, nor is Stephen Trenchard's funeral protracted by any desperate burst of grief from the mourners.

Decently, reverently, are all ceremonies performed. The mourners linger for a moment or so looking down at the coffin, rather as if they expected to see the departed spread his wings and soar visibly to a better world. Finding his ashes quiescent they sigh, shake their heads despondently, and move away, scrape the clay off their boots upon an adjacent plebeian tombstone, and walk slowly back to their carriages.

'Now for the will,' says Colonel Stormont, cheerily, as they drive away from the churchyard.

There is something of the nature of a lottery in that will. There may be small prizes even for outsiders. Mourning rings, silver tankards, lapis-lazuli snuff-boxes, carved ivory, or other spoil of Ind.

'Most mysterious disappearance of that girl,' exclaims the colonel, after a pause. 'What motive could she have for running away, unless——'

'Unless she had poisoned her uncle,' says Dr. Mitsand, interpreting the colonel's awful look. 'If she were guilty of that crime I think she would be here to-day. If she were capable of such an act

she would be capable of holding her ground afterwards.'

'They can't always stand it, you know,' argues Colonel Stormont, speaking of the murderous profession generally. 'They lose their heads and bolt after the thing is done. I suppose it looks so much worse to them when it is done than it did from the other side. They are a pluckless set for the most part, I think.'

'It was not in that girl to commit a murder,' says Dr. Mitsand, with conviction. 'The circumstantial evidence is strong against her, I admit—her disappearance—the poison taken from her uncle's surgery—her expectation of Mr. Trenchard's fortune. But if she had poisoned him in order to get possession of his money, it stands to reason she would have stayed to receive her inheritance. She would have known that to fly was almost to admit her guilt.'

'She may have been seized with a panic when the thing was done.'

'She would have stayed, colonel,' persists the doctor. 'She might have been stricken with fear,

but she would have held her ground. She is too clever to commit such a blunder as flight if she had been guilty.'

'How do you account for her absence, then?'

'Easily enough. Her uncle was forcing her into a hateful marriage, and she had not moral courage enough to oppose her will to his, so she let matters go on to the very last, and then ran away. A foolish thing to do, no doubt, but human.'

'But why should she have taken that prussic acid from her uncle's surgery, as it is pretty evident she did take it, though the fact hasn't come out yet?'

'She may have armed herself with that as the means of suicide—a last resource if all other modes of escape failed her. We have no evidence that the prussic acid which killed Stephen Trenchard was the poison taken from Dr. Faunthorpe's surgery.'

'You have the evidence of the empty bottle?'

'She may have thrown the stuff away, fearing to keep anything so dangerous in her possession. If she were guilty, she would hardly have left that bottle in her work-basket.'

'Humph,' mutters the colonel. 'You take an indulgent view of the case.'

'I admit that at the first I was staggered by the facts, and inclined to suspect Miss Faunthorpe; but reflection has led me to form another opinion.'

'Gad, sir, and I should be glad if I could believe her innocent,' says the colonel, energetically. 'She has eaten my head and salt; I have liked and admired her; and even'—with ineffable condescension—'thought of her as a wife for my eldest son. I believe that poor boy adores her. It would be horrid to think her guilty. But these things ought to be looked straight in the face, Dr. Mitsand, if we don't want the whole fabric of society shaken. We mustn't be prussic-acid-ed into our graves in a quiet little town like this, and the poisoner go scot free. No, sir; I wish the good old law for the punishment of poisoners was still in force. We want our *Chambre Ardente*, sir, for these scoundrels.'

They are at the gates of Lancaster Lodge by this time. The mourning coaches drive up to the hall door, where stands Podmore, quite sober on

this occasion, and fully awake to the dignity of his position. He ushers the mourners to the drawing-room, where the sunlight is subdued by half-closed venetian shutters, through which shines the sunny vista of lawn and flower-beds. The crimson satin couches and ottomans are ranged in solemn order. A silver tray of decanters and glasses is placed unobtrusively on a side table. There is a small writing-table in front of an open window, with a chair set beside it, evidently prepared for the family lawyer, thinks Colonel Stormont, as he takes a glass of old Madeira from the obsequious Podmore.

No family lawyer appears, however. The four gentlemen refresh themselves gravely at the side table, assisted by Podmore. Very bitter is the taste of the Amontillado to Dr. Faunthorpe, but his parched lips need to be moistened in some wise. The moment is at hand when the dealings of the dead to the living will be known. Will justice have been done to all his nieces, or will favours be heaped upon that one of them whom in secret he, Robert Faunthorpe, has loved the best?

Joel Pilgrim takes a second glass of sherry,

clears his throat, and goes to the little table by the window.

'I believe, gentlemen,' he begins, and the three mourners turn towards him, full of eager curiosity, 'that in cases where there is a will to be read this is about the time at which the ceremonial is gone through. Now my good friend Stephen Trenchard has left no will.'

There is a look of amazement in the countenances of his three hearers. Dr. Faunthorpe feels the room going round bewilderingly, and tries feebly to remember how the law of inheritance stands in the case of nieces whose uncle dies intestate.

'Do you mean to say that Mr. Trenchard, a man of business, has died intestate?' exclaims Colonel Stormont, with indignant incredulity.

'He has died intestate for the best of all reasons,' answers Joel, coolly, as he unlocks a drawer in the writing-table. 'He had nothing to bequeath!'

'Come, sir, you are laughing at us,' cries the colonel.

'He was too sincere to indulge in the mockery of a will, and, in that self-restraint, was a model to mankind in general, who seem to take delight in disposing of imaginary effects,' replies Joel, in an easy conversational tone. 'He made no will, but during his late illness he entrusted me with a little paper which it was his wish that I should read to any of his friends and relatives who should be present on this sad occasion. With your permission, gentlemen, I shall proceed to do so.'

'Make haste about it, sir,' cries the colonel. 'I can see that we have all been outrageously humbugged.'

'You are not the first, colonel, who has taken the appearance for the reality,' replies Joel, politely.

He unfolds a sheet of letter-paper covered with Stephen Trenchard's neat penmanship, and reads thus:—

'Having reason to believe that I may die insolvent, I refrain from the empty formula of a last will and testament. I have nothing to bequeath except those accommodation bills drawn upon Providence, which good men call blessings.

'The business which I conducted for thirty years in India was on the verge of insolvency when I retired from it, though the house of Trenchard and Co. stood high in the opinion of the commercial world, and its paper was as easily negotiated as that of the Bank of England. I had sunk my capital in the business, and I consider that I was guilty of no fraud in withdrawing from it about a third of the amount of that original capital, although I knew that in so doing I must precipitate the ultimate failure. I transferred my speculative trade to a man adroit enough to navigate the leaky vessel for a few more voyages upon the commercial sea, and I was enabled to make my retreat from India with ten thousand pounds and high repute; for, although I was known to have been engaged in some doubtful adventures, and to have been somewhat unscrupulous in my traffic, I was believed to be enormously rich.

'I was sixty-six years of age when I made up my mind to retire from the excitements and agitations of a hazardous trade, and to enjoy the lotus-eater's calm repose for the rest of my days. I calculated that the ten thousand pounds that I was able to

draw would, with a judicious use of my credit, last out my life, and enable me to glide in comfort to the grave. It pleased me to return to that native town which I had left as a penniless lad, and which, when I was honest and industrious, refused me daily bread. With a few thousands at my banker's, and the reputation of unlimited resources, I was able to command all that the town could give. Redcastle laid its riches at my feet. I had but to pay the rent of my house, the wages of my servants, and to give a cheque on account now and then to my tradespeople. Every year left me a little deeper in their debt.

'I fear that I may have excited false hope in the mind of my very dear niece, Sibyl Faunthorpe. I regret the possibility of this, but I cannot be blamed for any baseless ideas which she may have entertained on the subject of my supposed fortune. I have never made any statement calculated to mislead her. I have neither directly nor indirectly fostered expectations of an inheritance from me. My dear Sibyl has been the companion and solace of my retirement, and she has enjoyed all those

luxuries and comforts with which I have smoothed the pathway of my declining years. Should there be any balance, or residue of the money now in my banker's hands, at the time of my death, after the payment of my just debts, I hereby give the same to my friend and successor in commerce, Joel Pilgrim; but as I apprehend that my moneys in hand will hardly suffice to pay my outstanding accounts, I have not taken the trouble to put this bequest in the form a will.

'STEPHEN TRENCHARD,

'May 20th. 187-

CHAPTER XI.

'IT IS NOT NOW AS IT HAS BEEN OF YORE.'

ALEXIS goes to Dorley Mill a few days after his interview with Mr. Scrodgers the lawyer, and tells Linda Challice all that the man of law has said in relation to Trot, and the advisability of that young gentleman's being domiciled at the Grange.

'You see I want to establish the fact of his being my son,' says Alexis. 'People will hardly believe in my paternity while the little fellow is here. He ought to live with me—he ought to be seen in my company. A few years hence it won't so much matter where he may live. His name and position will be settled.'

'I understand,' says Linda, sadly. 'Yesterday you gave me a promise which made me very happy; to-day you take it back again.'

'Linda, forgive me,' cries Alexis, deeply dis-

tressed. 'If you knew how it grieves me to rob you of your darling! But it is for his good. Why cannot we three be happy as we have been together? The sweetest days of my life were those I spent under this dear roof—with him—with you. Why cannot those happy days come again, Linda? My love, my darling, what is the world worth that it should part us?'

His arm is round her, he draws her to his breast, looking down into those beseeching, agonized eyes, which meet his in silent reproach that pierces deeper than words. For one passionate moment he has forgotten the fetters that hold him to another, forgotten everything except that this girl has grown inexpressibly dear to him.

She releases herself from his arm, and he stands before her with shame-bowed head, conscience-stricken.

'Forgive me, Linda,' he pleads. 'I was thinking of what might have been. No, I will not be such a wretch as to rob you of Trot—not yet awhile, at any rate. What can I give him to replace his adopted mother's fond care? You shall keep him, Linda.'

'Not if it is for his interest to be with you,' Linda answers gravely. 'But you need not be in a hurry to take him from me. A few days—a few weeks even—can make little difference. Give me time to get accustomed to the idea of parting with him.'

'So be it. And you will let me come here very often and see him, so that he may grow fonder of me, and come to look upon me as his father?'

'No,' she answers, with downcast eyes. 'Let me have him quite to myself for this time. He loves you already, you have no need to win his affection. Let me have him all to myself, and when the day comes claim him from me, and I will give him to you without a tear.'

Alexis understands the motive of this denial, and feels that he has merited to be thus denied.

'You have only to command me, Miss Challice,' he says, 'and remember that this boy will be no son of mine if his affection for you, or his remembrance of your goodness, is ever lessened.'

'He is so young,' replies Linda, with a sigh. 'He will have so much time in which to forget.'

And then they part with a friendly shake hands, and a little commonplace talk about old Mr. Benfield and the mill, and both try to forget, or seem to forget, that fatal betrayal of feeling on the part of Alexis; and when he has gone Linda creeps up to her room,—the pretty girlish chamber, with its white draperies and water-colour sketches, Linda's own work, on the paneled walls—and kneels beside the little white bed, and sobs as if her heart were broken. Happily, her life of simple duty affords little leisure for the indulgence of grief, and she is obliged to bathe her swollen eyelids presently and to go downstairs to see about Trot's custard pudding, which delicacy, made with a new-laid egg, and baked in a saucer, no other hands can be permitted to prepare. Trot's sharp eyes discover the traces of tears in those heavy eyelids.

'What for you cry, mammie?' he demands. 'You not been naughty, has you?'

Tears and naughtiness go together in Trot's mind.

'I hope not, love.'

'And you not tumbled down 'tairs.'

'No, darling.'

'Den oo got nosing to cry for,' says Trot, decisively.

It is with the deepest shame that Alexis remembers that unhappy outbreak of his. This is how he has pleaded his friend's cause. This is his allegiance to Dick Plowden. He can hardly look that faithful friend in the face without blushing, when he gets back to the Grange.

'Did you see her?' asks Dick.

'Oh yes, I saw her.'

'And was she looking well?'

'A little pale and worried, I thought. She doesn't like parting with Trot, you see.'

'No, of course not.'

Alexis goes to London that afternoon and procures a copy of the entry of his marriage in the register at the little Gothic church in the Pimlico district, so memorable to Sibyl and to him; the church they entered so hopefully that bleak March morning, four years ago, careless of the future, confident of happiness, and knowing little more of life's actualities than if they had been the prince and princess of a fairy

tale. In that stony labyrinth of Pimlico Alexis is within an easy walk of Dixon Street, Chelsea. He goes by ways that were painfully familiar to him in the days of his poverty. He seems to know every shop-front in this water-side street, every stone, every housetop, and chimney-stack, and street corner. He leaves the prim dwelling-places of middle-class respectability, and enters poverty's Bohemia. There flows the river beyond its muddy margin, rosy in the evening sun. How the scene brings back the bygone time, the heart-sinking and despair, the dread of to-morrow, the vain hope, the crushing disappointment! There is little use, perhaps, in this visit to his old quarters. His will is made, his son's heritage is rendered as secure as the law of the land can make it; there is little fear, one would suppose, of the boy's parentage being called into question in the time to come; but Alexis has a fancy for seeing the house which sheltered his poverty and care, which was home in the days when he thought himself secure of his wife's love. Here is the dingy old street, more dingy and dismal in the warm summer twilight than in wintry obscurity. How sorely all

the doors and window-sashes want painting! what wisps of dirty straw and ragged scraps of paper have drifted to this quiet haven from the busier ways outside. Odd curtains drape the parlour windows, grimy blinds droop hopelessly on their slackened lines, like sails in a dead calm. Here and there a few flower-pots testify to the love of the beautiful in some struggling denizen; in one area there is a family of rabbits, in another a collection of poultry; in a third a cobbler has built his wooden workshop. If it were possible for anything already so debased to sink a little lower, Alexis would think that Dixon Street has gone down since he last beheld it. But the effect lies doubtless rather in his own eye, which is a stranger to the place.

Mrs. Bonny has been endowed with an orderly mind, and it has been her constant struggle to raise her dwelling-place above the Dixon Street level. She has eschewed rabbits and poultry. Her parlour windows are shaded by clean though faded chintz, and display the healthiest geraniums in the street. Her door-steps are hearthstoned daily, and it grieveth her to the heart when the ruthless feet of her lodgers

or their following sully the purity of the stone. It must be confessed that this aspiration after the beautiful, this struggle to maintain cleanliness in a neighbourhood where blacks fall as the rain from heaven, has exercised a deteriorating influence upon Mrs. Bonny's temper. The native sweetness of that overworked woman's disposition has been turned to sour by the perpetual falling of smuts, the frequent passage of muddy soles across newly hearthstoned steps, the reckless disregard of scrapers and door-mats, which is idiosyncratic of the lodger family. When she opens her door to a stranger, Mrs. Bonny looks not at his face, but directs a furtive and angry glance at his boots, and follows his progress into her house with a smothered murmur of dissatisfaction. Her life is an endless warfare, which her constancy of spirit would render absolutely noble, were the enemy wherewith she striveth a trifle more exalted; but to fret and fume about the soiling of a door-step, to be miserable because a dirty boot sullieth one's stair carpet, hath in it something of pettishness and folly; and these small and sordid cares have impressed themselves upon Mrs. Bonny's visage—they

have drawn down the angles of her mouth, and written a network of wrinkles upon her brow.

She opens the door to Alexis this evening. The rosy light on the river is deepening to a crimson glow; the sky grows faint and opal-tinted; and a young moon, which has been showing pale all the afternoon, begins to brighten in the eastern gray. Alexis had been prepared to observe some surprise in his landlady's countenance at this sudden reappearance of his, after a lapse of three years and a half, but to his astonishment she receives him with perfect tranquillity of countenance, save for an anxious downward glance at his boots, a look which he remembers of old.

'I thought as much,' she mutters. 'You can walk upstairs, Mr. Stanmore.'

Stanmore was the adopted name of his poverty.

'I have called for a little chat with you, Mrs. Bonny, if you can spare time,' he begins politely, remembering that his old landlady, like the Fates, was a goddess who needed a good deal of propitiation.

'I ain't got the time now,' replies Mrs. Bonny, snappishly, 'for I was cooking my parlour's supper

when you rang, and I dessay it 'll have stuck to the bottom of the frying-pan when I get back. You can walk upstairs, can't you? You know your way, I should think.'

'To the front room?' inquires Alexis.

'Yes, of course. It happened to be empty when the young woman called about it—not as I'm ever long empty, thank Providence. It ain't much reward to get for slaving from morning till night, gracious knows. Wipe your boots, if you please, Mr. Stanmore. There's a mat at the foot of the stairs.'

The master of Cheswold Grange does not quite understand the drift of these remarks, but he obeys as meekly as the penniless waiter upon fortune was wont to do in days gone by. Mrs. Bonny hurries back to her frying-pan, and Alexis goes up the well-remembered staircase, with its papered wall representing a bewildering multiplication of Gothic archways of a dingy brown hue, its narrow window with a gaudy painted blind of ecclesiastical design, its heavy old balusters, the remains of better days, when Dixon Street was the abode of polite society, and fine gentlemen and ladies may have roystered

and gambled in these old rooms after an evening at Ranelagh.

Twilight has thickened, and Mrs. Bonny's staircase is wrapped in shadow when Alexis opens the door of that one room which was once his home—a single chamber which would then have been deemed all-sufficient as a home could he but have found the wherewithal to pay the rent thereof. How well he remembers that miserable home-coming, when, like Byron, he found his hearth deserted and his household gods shattered. The memory saddens him. He forgets his newly found son—forgets the business that has brought him to Dixon Street. The picture of that bitter day comes back, and shuts out every other image.

The room looks as if not one article of its furniture had been removed or altered since he saw it last. There stands the scarlet tea-tray on the table against the wall—there the tea-caddy—there the leather-bound family Bible. There are the old chintz-covered arm-chairs, the tent bedstead, the trumpery crockery images—awkward caricatures of old Chelsea ware—on the high narrow mantelpiece; and yonder, seated

on the well-remembered sofa, in a despondent attitude, with hands clasped listlessly and drooping head, appears a figure at sight of which Alexis Secretan recoils as if he had seen a ghost.

He may well be startled, for this figure is the image of his wife as he has seen her on many an evening, at his home-coming, when she has grown weary of waiting for his return, and has sunk into despondency.

For a moment his blood freezes, and he feels as if a spirit were there; but in the next instant a cry of surprise breaks from his lips, 'Sibyl, can it be you?'

She starts up from the sofa, looks at him in bewilderment, and then throws herself upon his breast.

'Alex, my best, my dearest, my only protector and comfort,' she cries, 'how did you know—who told you that I was here?'

He puts her away from him gently but firmly. The thought of her falsehood about his son's death comes between him and his wife; and it may be that love for her, as he has often told himself, has died out of his heart, murdered by her unkindness.

There is something else too, perhaps, in this moment that comes between him and the pale face lying on his breast. The image of a sweeter and less selfish woman, whose eyes looked up at him full of grief and pain a few hours ago.

'Alex, how unkind you are, and how coldly you look at me! But you came here in search of me, did you not? You are not living here?'

'No, Sibyl, I am not living here, and I did not come here to look for you. How was I to suppose that I should find you here when I left you at Redcastle in the house of Stephen Trenchard? I did not think you would come back to such a place as this of your own election.'

'It was the only place I could think of as a refuge, Alex. I knew that I should be safe with Mrs. Bonny, and I knew of no other lodgings in London. Perhaps, too, I had a fancy for coming back here. It was like returning to the past—to the days when you loved me.'

She says this shyly, standing before her husband with downcast eyes, like a child who has offended and anticipates reproof. There is all the old inno-

cence of manner, the almost childlike sweetness which charmed Alexis when he first saw Sibyl Faunthorpe in Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room, but there is a chilled and deadened feeling at his heart, as of love that has fallen asleep and can wake no more, or love that has been stricken dumb, and can find its old familiar speech never again.'

'Say rather the days in which I thought you worthy to be loved,' he replies, gravely. 'You made your election when you left this room. You cannot undo it by returning here, whatever may be the caprice that moves you. When you chose to be your uncle Trenchard's toady instead of my wife, you cancelled the bond between you and me. I gave you the option of renewing that old bond, but, having your sordid aim in view, and fancying yourself on the threshold of success, you refused my offer. That made an end of our union for ever. There is no legal process, no decree of the Divorce Court, which could separate us more utterly than we are parted now.'

'Alex,' she cries piteously, 'you did once love me. How can you be so unforgiving?'

'I'll tell you how and why. When we last met and parted I asked you a question, a question that involved the happiness of my manhood and the hope of my age. You answered me with a deliberate lie.'

'I don't remember,' falters Sibyl, deeply humiliated. She had thought it so easy a matter to reclaim this faithful heart. In her darkest hour she had always counted upon her husband's love as a certainty, a treasure inalienable, despite her sins against him, thinking of him somewhat after the manner in which man is apt to think of God's mercy and forgiveness, as an inexhaustible fund, upon which he can draw as largely as he likes, with no fear of having his bills returned.

'You don't remember that when I asked for my son you told me he was dead,—looked me calmly in the face and told me black and bitter lie. He had only survived his birth by a few days, you said. All the hopes I had built upon his existence were baseless and delusive. You made me believe this, Sibyl.'

She looks at him intently in the twilight, with a look that is half terror, half wonder.

'Why should you imagine that I was deceiving you when I told you of your son's death?' she asks.

'For the best possible reason. I have found my son!'

'What? You have been to Dorley Mill?'

'I have been to the place where you left your child, left him, glad to be released from a tie which most women hold sacred; left him to play your part at the feet of Stephen Trenchard, to pass for a spinster, and captivate country gentlemen, and angle for a fortune. You have won your game, I hope after making such sacrifices,—if it can be called a sacrifice to have abandoned husband and child. Stephen Trenchard is dead, I suppose, and you have inherited his fortune, or you would hardly have deserted your post, even for the sentimental pleasure of revisiting the scene of your married life.'

'My uncle Stephen is not dead. I have inherited nothing. I stand before you a pauper, Alex, bankrupt in everything; even in hope, since you have ceased to love me.'

'Your uncle not dead! You have voluntarily

abandoned your chance of being his heiress? You must have changed greatly since that night when you and I talked together in Mr. Trenchard's house.'

'I was surrounded with difficulties, Alexis. I should have held my ground to the very last;—yes, call me mercenary, despise me if you will, I will not shrink from the truth;—I would have stopped with my uncle till the day of his death if he had not made that impossible by his tyranny.'

She tells Alexis the story of the last few months how she had been urged to marry Joel Pilgrim, and how when matters grew desperate she had taken flight.

'I wrote to that good girl, Jane Dimond, and asked her to find me a lodging, here if possible. Luckily for me this room was empty, and I came straight from the railway station here.'

'A disappointing end to your schemes and hopes, says Alexis, still unpitying. He cannot easily forgive that heartless falsehood about his boy. His wrongs as a husband he might pardon. The injury done him as a father rankles deeper.

'It is a sorry end, Alexis, humiliating, shameful.

For upwards of three years I have been my uncle's patient companion. I have borne all his caprices, devoted myself to the task of making his life pleasant to him. He has been very good to me. I should be wickedly ungrateful if I were to deny or to forget that. I think, too, that he loved me, in his undemonstrative manner; and if I was deceived in believing that he would make me his heiress, everybody else in Redcastle laboured under the same delusion. But this Mr. Pilgrim's influence upon him is stronger than mine. I do not believe that my uncle really wished me to marry that man, or even that Joel Pilgrim's presence in his house made him happy; but there was an influence of some kind —an influence which I could never understand—exercised by that East Indian upon my uncle Stephen.'

'I congratulate you upon having escaped that unholy house,' says Alexis. 'I am glad you did not carry your subservience to your uncle so far as to marry the East Indian. I am very glad you drew the line at that.'

'Had I been as free as my uncle thought me I should have done the same,' replies Sibyl.

'And may I ask what plan of existence you have formed to replace your blighted hopes?' says Alexis. 'I suppose after this rebellious flight of yours there is no chance of your inheriting your uncle's fortune.'

'I gave up every idea of that when I left his house. As for a plan of life, I have none. The only hope I had has left me. I have a little ready money, and a few trinkets which I can convert into money. This will carry me on till I can get a situation as a governess—if that is to be done without a friend to speak for my character. I have not neglected my education during the last three years, and I can fall back upon the old drudgery.'

She says all this despondently. Hope has died within her breast. She had thought it so easy a thing to cancel the past, and now it seems to her that she and Alexis Secretan are as far apart as if they had never loved each other, never sworn life-long fidelity, never spent their careless honeymoon together under the young leafage in the Bois de Boulogne, among St. Germain's forest walks, and on the lamplit Boulevards, with all the joyous life of Europe's gayest city drifting by them like a stream

of folly—never suffered poverty's cark and care together—never shared hope and despair—never wandered, side by side, on the chill border-land of famine.

So far Alexis has shown no sign of relenting. His tone has expressed contempt rather than anger, and has wounded more deeply than the stormiest reproaches could wound. He now grows thoughtful, and walks up and down the room in meditative silence, as he has walked many a time in days gone by when his meditations were of ways and means. Sibyl watches him as he moves slowly to and fro with bent head. The twilight hides his face, that summer twilight in which they sat so often when they first became inmates of this room, and when poverty was a new thing to them.

'Why did you tell me that lie about our child?' he asks, after a long silence.

'Shall I tell you why, Alexis? It was because I wanted to have some hold upon you; to have some treasure to give you when the time came for me to come back to you, your true and faithful wife as I have been from first to last. You would scorn

my uncle Stephen's fortune, you told me—repudiate that as you would repudiate me. But I thought you could not shut your heart against me if I came to you with our son. He must have been a link between us, a tie no unkindness of yours, no sin of mine, could break.'

'And you thought to make that link the stronger by telling me that my son, whom you had placidly resigned to the care of a stranger, was dead.'

'If I had told you the truth you would have claimed him. He would have been yours, and not mine.'

'You are an accomplished schemer, Sibyl, but Fate has a knack of spoiling your plans. Accident brought me in the way of my boy; an accident, which put my life in peril for some time, brought me under the same roof with my son, and I loved him before I knew that he had any claim to my love.'

'How did you discover his identity at last?' asks Sibyl faintly.

'Oh, in a very simple way. I need not trouble you with details.'

'And he is well—happy

'How good of you to inquire about him! Yes, he has thriven admirably with strangers. So well that he naturally rebels against being transferred to his own flesh and blood.'

'Alexis,' falters his wife, piteously, 'I know I must seem a heartless mother, a woman without woman's natural feeling, but starvation brings humanity very low. When I came to Dorley Mill I had been keeping fellowship with Hunger for a long time. I had known what it was to be houseless and ailing, to lie shivering under the cold unpitying stars. It was vital to me to find a home for my baby, a home far away from Redcastle. I was obliged to disassociate myself from my child. It was imperative for me to do that if I wanted to win my uncle Trenchard's fortune—and I did want to be rich, Alex, for your sake, for our child's sake, as much as for my own. If it was your duty as a man to try every honest means to conquer fortune, was it a sin in me to try the only means I knew, to snatch the only chance Fate ever offered to me? Will you try and think of all this, Alex, and forgive me, if you can?'

She rises once more from the sofa where she has sat despondingly. She goes to her husband, and lays her hand lightly on his shoulder—such a poor little hand—such a feather's weight, as it seems to him, lying loosely there. That touch, faltering and tremulous, moves him more than her arguments.

'Forgive you? yes, poor child,' he says, gravely. 'Perhaps, after all, it is foolishness rather than sin that I have to pardon—and God pardons even sin. What am I, weak offending man, that I should be more unmerciful than Heaven? Yes, I forgive you, Sibyl; but remember, my dear, that the past is an unalterable quantity. We have to carry the burden of our past deeds down to the grave. No man ever shifts that load from his shoulders. You and I can never be again what we were the day you left this house to go in quest of fortune. You left something behind you then that you can never reclaim.'

'You mean that I lost your love?'

'My affection, my compassion, you shall have to the end of our lives; but the heart that trusted and loved you is dead and gone.'

'I have no right to expect that it should be

otherwise,' answers Sibyl, in a voice broken by sobs; 'I set too much value on money. I was blind to all other loss that might befall me. I thought that when I came to you with my uncle Trenchard's fortune in my hand you would forgive me, you would take me back to your heart.'

'It is because you come to me without fortune that I am able to forgive you, Sibyl. I thank Providence for the failure of your plans. No good could ever have come of Stephen Trenchard's money to me or my race.'

'And you will let me see my boy, Alex. I know that I have been a heartless mother, but I have suffered many a pang of remorse. You will let me see him before ——'

She breaks down here, and sobs upon her husband's shoulder.

'Before what, Sibyl?' he asks, gently. 'Don't, cry, my dear. There are quiet days in store for both of us, now that we have got rid of our evil genius, Stephen Trenchard.'

His tone is kinder than it has been yet. He has felt a touch of remorse at remembering that he could

have given his erring wife a warmer welcome had she but returned to him before his experience of womanly tenderness and womanly unselfishness at Dorley Mill. It was only when he learned to draw comparisons between his wife and another woman that love had perished.

'God bless you for those kind words, Alex, the first you have spoken to me to-night; and you will let me see my child—before I die.'

'Before you die! Yes, Sibyl, and through many a year to come, if you will be true to your little one and me, and put Stephen Trenchard's money out of your head. Who talks about dying?'

'I have suffered so much, Alex, and it has been so hard a task to hide every pang—to be all smiles, and gaiety, and thoughtfulness for others, with my own hidden sorrow always gnawing at my heart. It has been a bitter task. I feel as if the burden had been too heavy for me—I feel quite worn out with the long battle—physically as well as mentally. Indeed, Alex, I do not think that I have long to live.

This is a plea for mercy *in formâ pauperis*, and touches Alexis. He is growing very tender-hearted

to this wife, for whom he had told himself that his old love was dead and gone. The room in which they had suffered poverty's chilling apprenticeship together seems to him to bring them closer to each other than any less familiar place of meeting could have done. And presently, when Sibyl has struck a match and lighted a pair of sallow-looking candles, which but dimly illuminate the scene, Alexis is moved to deeper pity by seeing the change that the last six months have wrought in his wife's beauty. That wan white face, those sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, tell of a struggle that has been exhausting alike to mind and body.

'My poor girl, how changed you are!' he exclaims, drawing her to him in the dim light, and scrutinizing her altered face.

'Yes, there is no beauty to be proud of now, Alex. I might sit in my corner in Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room, and even your eye would not notice me. The faded governess would come and go like a shadow. I have lost my good looks—all the capital Fortune gave me to start in life—and I have won nothing—not even uncle Trenchard's money.'

'We can do without it, Sibyl. If you had come to me with that ill-gotten wealth in your hand I would have had nothing to say to you. I take you back to-night because you come without it.'

'Back to your heart, Alex?'

'To my home and my affectionate regard, my dear. Our hearts are not always to be commanded. Don't look so sad, Sibyl, our Hampshire breezes will blow the colour back to your cheeks.'

'Hampshire? Ah, that is where our boy lives. But what took you to that part of the country, Alex?'

'I'll answer that question when you have told me what took you there, and how your child came to be born in a Hampshire Union.'

'I'll tell you, Alex. I have no need to hide anything now. When I left you, with those ten pounds which I extorted from you so cruelly, my only thought was to hide myself somewhere till after my baby's birth. I went into a little country village in Surrey—a quiet little place near Guildford—and hired a room in a cottage, a tiny whitewashed bedroom which cost me three and sixpence a week, and

there I lived for seven weeks, spending as little as possible, living on bread and butter and tea, till at last my landlady, who was only a farm labourer's wife, would bring me up a little plate of meat sometimes out of charity. In seven weeks I had spent only four pounds on myself, but I had spent three more in buying clothes for my baby, and I had spent almost all my time in making them—those long dull days when I used to sit for hours together alone in my little room listening to the ticking of the Dutch clock, and the chirping of the crickets downstairs. I think I must have gone mad in those monotonous desolate days, if it had not been for my needlework. I used to go out into the fields sometimes at dusk, and wander about for an hour or so, and I felt as if I belonged to nobody, and was quite the loneliest creature in this wide world.'

'A sorry prologue to your dignified existence at Lancaster Lodge.'

'As the time for my baby's birth drew nearer, I began to think with dread of his being born in that poor little room among coarse labouring people. I pined for a friend, any one of my own class who

would be kind to me. I took a horror of that stifling little room with its one small window, and whitewashed walls, and patchwork coverlet, and all the piggy and cabbagy smells that used to creep up from the room below. So I tried to remember any friend who would be likely to be kind to me if I flung myself upon her benevolence. I could think of only one person, Maggie Rawlings, a girl who had been very fond of me at school, almost ridiculously fond, giving me keepsakes, and insisting on wearing some of my hair in a locket, and showing her affection in all manner of foolish ways. She was the daughter of a farmer in Hampshire, and as she had huge hampers sent her twice in a quarter, and had always plenty of money to spend, I concluded that her people were rich. I knew that she was an impulsive, warm-hearted little creature, and generous as the light of day. So I thought that if I went to her she would find me a shelter of some sort and be kind to me and my baby. I went to Winchester by rail, and from Winchester I went on foot to find Hill-side Farm.'

'Poor child,' murmurs Alexis, 'poor foolish

child—our worst fortunes shared together were not so bad as this.'

'Unfortunately, I had forgotten all but the name of the farm, and that Winchester was the nearest station, but how far that nearest station might be from Maggie's home I had no idea. The consequence was that I wandered helplessly about from village to village for three days, led astray by wrong information—sent first to one farm and then to another—and having to sleep at village inns, where I paid dear for very poor accommodation. On the fourth day I succeeded in finding Hill-side Farm, nearly thirty miles from Winchester, and there a cruel disappointment awaited me. My old schoolfellow was married, and had gone to live in Lincolnshire. Mrs. Rawlings was barely civil to me, and gave me her daughter's address with evident reluctance. No doubt she thought me a very questionable character. My shabby clothes denounced me. If I had possessed money enough or strength enough for the journey, I think I should have gone down to Lincolnshire in search of Maggie, but I had neither. I was ill and worn out by the fatigue of

the last three days, and this disappointment at the end of all completely crushed me. Two days afterwards my baby was born in the workhouse. That was the only refuge left open to me at the last. If you have been to Dorley Mill you must know all the rest. I left the workhouse penniless, and but for Linda Challice's goodness I could never have made my way to Redcastle. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me, Alex, now that you know all the truth?'

'I forgive you, Sibyl, and pity you with all my heart. You did yourself a deeper wrong than you did me when you sacrificed all natural feeling to the worship of your golden calf. You have paid a heavy price for your mistake; it would be cruel to add my upbraidings to the sum. And now let us begin life afresh, little woman, and be happy if we can. Fortune has been kinder to me—who have wooed her somewhat carelessly—than to you who have sought her with such mistaken diligence. Poverty need never more afflict us. Your husband is no longer Mr. Secretan, *alias* Stanmore, a humble waiter upon the tide of luck, but Alexis Secretan,

Esquire, of Cheswold Grange, in the county of Hants —able to give his wife her carriage and her flower-garden, her dairy, poultry-yard, and village school, and to leave his son the modest heritage of a small landowner.'

'Alexis! you are laughing at me.'

'No, Sibyl. When I stood before you at Lancaster Lodge, last December, I was able to take you to as fair a home as you could care to inhabit; but I would not tempt you with the gifts of fortune. I waited for your heart to speak.'

'And you were absolutely rich at that time? You could have given me all I had to hope for from my uncle Stephen?'

'I cannot presume to measure Mr. Trenchard's possessions. My fortune, I have told you, is a modest one, but it is large enough to buy all things needful to real happiness. The man of fabulous wealth can only live. He cannot eat two dinners in the same day, or ride two horses at once, or consume more than a given quantity of fresh air, or get more pleasure out of life than his mental capacity for enjoyment will let him, be he king or kaiser.'

'It seems that I have made a sorry mistake, says Sibyl, with a sigh.

'A mistake which we will do our best to mend, poor child,' replies Alexis, kindly. 'And now, Sibyl, I don't know whether you have dined to-day, but I am quite sure I have not. So I think the best thing I can do is to go out to our old haunts and buy a rump-steak, which our faithful Bonny will cook for our supper. Unless you had rather come to an hotel and bid the faithful Bonny good-bye.'

'I had rather stay where I am for a day or two, Alex; I don't feel well enough to move.'

'We must call in a medical man, Sibyl, if you are so ill as that.'

'I don't think a doctor would be of any use. I am not so much ill as tired. I shall soon be better, I dare say, now you are so kind to me.'

'And doesn't it cheer you to know that we have done with our old enemy, poverty; that our future is to be bright and prosperous?'

'I am glad with all my heart, Alex, for your sake and our boy's; but I do not feel as if I had any future to look forward to in this world.'

'Nonsense, Sibyl! That is all the effect of debility—a hypochondriacal view of life altogether. You will see things differently after half a dozen doses of quinine, and a daily mutton chop. I shouldn't wonder if Guinness's stout were the best antidote for these dark ideas. And now I'll go and see if Mrs. Bonny can send any one for that steak, or if I must go out and forage for myself.'

He goes to the door, opens it, and finds himself face to face with an unknown individual in a gray coat. Mrs. Bonny stands behind the stranger with a brass candlestick uplifted, to show him the way that he should go.

'Who the deuce are you, sir?' asks Alexis, rather savagely. 'This room is not to be let.'

His nerves have been too completely unstrung by that unexpected meeting of the last hour to allow of his being civil to an intrusive stranger.

'I am not looking for lodgings,' answers the gray man coolly. 'I have come here to look for a young lady. Ah! there she is, I see. I have a warrant to arrest Miss Sibyl Faunthorpe—on suspicion of murder.'

'Suspicion of murder!'

'Yes, on suspicion of having murdered her uncle, Stephen Trenchard, Esq., of Lancaster Lodge, Redcastle, in the county of York, to be transferred in my charge to Redcastle gaol, there to remain pending the issue of the adjourned inquest held to inquire into the death of the aforesaid Stephen Trenchard, Esq.'

'The man must be mad,' cries Sibyl, clinging to Alexis. 'I left my uncle alive—in no danger.'

'Anything you say now will be used against you hereafter, miss,' says the man in gray, in a warning voice.

'Alexis, you don't believe——'

'I believe nothing so wildly improbable, my dear. Let me see your warrant, sir.'

It is shown him; a formal document, issued in Redcastle, Yorkshire, and endorsed by a Middlesex magistrate. Alexis knows just enough of the law to know that the warrant is a genuine instrument, and that resistance is likely to be useless. There is but one loophole.

'Your warrant seems right enough,' he says, 'but

it is issued against Sibyl Faunthorpe; this lady is Mrs. Secretan, my wife.'

'The lady may have a dozen aliases, sir,' replies Mr. Judbury, with undisturbed equanimity; 'but she's the lady we want, all the same; and with your leave I'm going to take her back to Yorkshire by the mail. There's just about time to do it, I think, Trivett,' adds Mr. Judbury across his shoulder to a man in the background.

'My wife is not well enough to travel,' says Alexis.

'Oh, come, she was well enough to travel to London less than a week ago; she must be well enough to go back. I'll take the responsibility of removing her. You've got a cab, Trivett?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Come along, Miss Faunthorpe. If you come quietly I shall say nothing about the handcuffs, you know, but I've got 'em in my pocket.'

'What am I to do, Alexis?' Sibyl asks, piteously.

'If you think you can bear the journey, go, dear. I will go with you. Whatever hideous mistake has arisen out of your uncle's death can be best righted

by your presence. Don't be afraid, Sibyl, I will stand by you.'

'And you do not believe——'

'I believe that you are as innocent as a baby of any wrong against Stephen Trenchard,' answers Alexis with conviction.

'That makes me strong,' says Sibyl, quietly putting on her hat and jacket. 'I will come back to Redcastle.'

'Well, I think, miss, under existing circumstances you'd better,' answers the officer, with suppressed satire.

'When did my uncle die?'

'The morning you left, miss, strange to say. Found dead in his bed. You left by the 6.20 train. According to the medical evidence your departure and Mr. Trenchard's death must have been pretty nearly simultaneous.'

'He died suddenly, then?'

'Uncommon.'

'And why do they suppose that he was murdered?'

'Because about an ounce of prussic acid was

found in his inside. Please to bear in mind, miss, that any remark of yours will be used against you by-and-bye.'

This warning is unheeded, nay, unheard by Sibyl.

'Prussic acid!' she cries, with an awful look. 'Oh, Alex, how dreadful! I had some prussic acid in a bottle, enough to put an end to my life if there had been no other way of escape left me from that horrid man, and I left the bottle at Lancaster Lodge.'

'Yes, miss, and it was found there empty.'

They go down to the cab, Sibyl leaning on her husband's arm, and drive away from Dixon Street in the summer dusk. Mrs. Bonny watches the departing chariot with uplifted hands, and eyes that ask the heavens to witness her astonishment.

'This beats all my experience of lodgers,' she exclaims. 'That I should live to have my first floor took prisoner for murder, and to see my door-steps spiled by the muddy boots of a defective perliceman!'

CHAPTER XII.

'TIS HELD THAT SORROW MAKES US WISE.

THROUGHOUT the tedious journey by the night mail Alexis supports and comforts Sibyl by his presence. All bitterness of feeling has passed out of his mind. He sees his wife the victim of a false accusation, and he is ready to pity and defend her.

'You do not believe these men, Alex?' she repeats many times during that summer night as she clings closer to her husband with a shiver as of cold, though the midsummer air is mild and balmy. 'You do not believe this horrible accusation, dear?'

'Not a word, not a breath,' he answers, cheerily. 'These mistakes are common enough, love. It will be easily set right. You have only to keep up your courage and trust in Providence and me.'

'Oh, Alex, how good you are! and how little I deserve your goodness!' she answers, with a stifled sob.

Mr. Judbury, though hardened by much travelling

on the stormy path of official life, shows some delicacy of feeling. He sends his follower to a second-class carriage, and takes his seat as far from Mr. and Mrs. Secretan as the limits of a first-class compartment will allow. Nay, he is benevolent enough to refresh himself with occasional comfortable naps, but is always wakeful and alert when speed slackens and the train stops. He apparently considers that an attempt to escape from the train at full speed is an evil not to be apprehended.

So the soft summer morning dawns gradually, mysteriously, with a slow lightening of the landscape and a faint breath of chiller air creeping among the woods and across the hill-tops, and Aurora sees Mr. Judbury reposing luxuriously in his padded corner with a red silk handkerchief draped picturesquely about his bald head, and his manly chest in a manner doubled up into his shepherd's plaid waistcoat. The new-born day sheds but a sickly light upon Sibyl's worn face, as it leans against her husband's shoulder, and Alexis, scrutinizing it in that clear light, sees how marked and deep is the change that has been wrought there. Care has en-

graven lines that happiness can never erase. This pallid countenance, with sunken eyes, ringed with purple shadow, is but the ghost of the fair face that shone upon him in Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room. Deepest pity moves him as he gazes on that altered beauty, lovely still, for the lines have the perfection of the sculptor's marble—a beauty that neither age nor death, sickness nor care can deface,—but the glow and brightness of colouring are gone. Sibyl is no longer a beauty for the vulgar eye to admire, no longer the handsomest woman in Redcastle.

That melancholy journey comes to an end at last. They arrive at Krampston in the early morning, and after waiting nearly an hour in a labyrinthine terminus get a train to convey them to Redcastle, which provincial shrine of the genius of quietude they reach at an hour which Mr. Judbury picturesquely describes as breakfast-time. From the Redcastle station, naturally half a mile out of the town, they drive to Redcastle Jail, a clean and modern building, of Gothic architecture, occupying an important site on the high road above Bar, an edifice which is described in local handbooks as an ornament to the

town. Sibyl has ridden and driven past its mediæval gateway many a time, and has glanced at the lancet windows with a ladylike indifference to the life going on behind them. It seems a curious thing—a severance from all the outer world and the common round of life—to be driven under that stony arch, and along that smooth gravel drive, and to hear the iron gate close behind her with a clang that sounds like the snap of the shears of Atropos.

They all go into a stone-flagged hall together, a hall in which cleanliness and order reign supreme, and in which the ticking of a large clock overpowers all the sound of humanity. Here there is a brief consultation held between Mr. Judbury and an official, and, after a little humming and hawing, Sibyl is conducted to a small plainly furnished room, which is hardly to be called a cell. There is a bed-chamber adjoining, and both rooms are guarded with substantial doors, ponderously locked and bolted, but the place is not so bad as the dungeon she has pictured to herself with a shudder during that long journey. She has fancied herself crouching in a stone cell, with a little straw in a corner, and a large

iron ring against the wall, to which she would perchance be chained, while between massive iron bars, high up in the wall, crept a faint gleam of light. This is the only kind of dungeon with which painters and poets have made her familiar.

Alexis has not been allowed to accompany his wife to the room allotted to her, but on his explaining the case to the warder he is treated with considerable civility, and taken straight to the governor of the prison, a young man who has lately exchanged a military career for the guardianship of criminals. From this gentleman Alexis receives every assurance of sympathy, and to this gentleman, Captain Heathcote, he gives a brief history of his married life, telling nothing that can throw discredit upon Sibyl, but alleging her attachment to her uncle Stephen Trenchard, as the reason of their separation and her concealment of her marriage.

'It happened, unfortunately, that the Secretans and Trenchards were, like the Montagues and Capulets, foes to the death,' he tells Captain Heathcote. 'There was an old feud between my poor father and Stephen Trenchard, the circumstances

of which I need not enter into. I believe my father was the injured person in that quarrel; my wife naturally believed her uncle in the right. We were quietly married, in London, and my wife kept her marriage a secret from her family. When Mr. Trenchard came home from India he asked her to go and live with him. My circumstances at that time were at very low water, and I had no home to give my wife. So she came to Redcastle, resumed her maiden name, and lived under her uncle's roof, until his attempt to force her into a marriage with an East Indian *protégé* of his compelled her to leave his house.

Captain Heathcote listens, and is thoughtful. The story sounds credible enough, and is in some measure confirmed by the copy of the marriage register, which Alexis shows the captain. Captain Heathcote, upon whose military status Redcastle society looks kindly, though inclined to be somewhat supercilious about his official position, has met Sibyl at Colonel Stormont's, and it goes hard with him to imagine that she can have been capable of this hideous crime which is imputed to her. Yet it must be confessed that there was never a more awkward-

combination of circumstances. Her secret flight—coincident with her uncle's death; her possession of the poison—or the same kind of poison—by which he died; the finding of the empty bottle in her work-basket; and now this revealment of her marriage, so long concealed from those among whom she has lived—her nearest friends and kindred—these things suggest a capacity for deceit—a disposition in which duplicity is second nature. These considerations make Captain Heathcote grave and thoughtful, but he is not the less courteous and obliging.

'You may be assured I shall do all in my power to lessen the painfulness of Miss—I beg your pardon—Mrs. Secretan's position. We are never very severe in our treatment of persons who are here only under suspicion; and until Mrs. Secretan is committed for trial—which I trust she will not be—we shall contrive to relax our rules as much as possible in her favour. Burton tells me he has given her comfortable rooms.'

'You are very good. Please God she will not be long under this horrible suspicion. I imagine that directly the matter is investigated her innocence

must appear; but in the meanwhile I am most grateful for your kindness. My wife is looking very ill. I think she really requires medical attendance. Her uncle is a medical man in this town, perhaps it would be as well for him to see her, if it might be allowed.'

'Certainly. Dr. Faunthorpe is not our official surgeon, but he might see Mrs. Secretan.'

'Thanks. And may I be allowed to see her?'

'As often as you like; but not alone. I shall be obliged to place a female warder in Mrs. Secretan's room.'

'I am not likely to have anything to say which the warder may not hear; and I shall be glad to know that my wife is not alone. She is in a very low state of health, and will be all the better for companionship, however humble.'

'You would like to see her, perhaps, before you leave?'

'Very much.'

'Then we'll go to her.'

Captain Heathcote leads the way to a clean and airy corridor, beckons to a warder to unlock a door, and admits Alexis into the prisoner's room.

Sibyl is sitting listlessly by the open window—a closely barred window looking into the stone quadrangle where the prisoners are solemnly tramping, single file, in a circle, for their regulation hour of air and exercise. A respectable young woman, in a white muslin cap, has just brought a cup of tea and a plate of bread and butter for the new arrival. There is no question of jail fare yet awhile. Mrs. Secretan could have ortolans or *pâtés de foie gras*, if she liked to import those delicacies from the outside world.

'My dear Sibyl, Captain Heathcote has been kind enough to promise that you shall have all possible indulgence, so you must try to keep up your spirits.'

'Yes, Alexis,' she answers, quietly, 'I have very little cause for unhappiness when you are so kind to me. How do you do, Captain Heathcote?' she says, turning to the governor with a faint smile. 'It seems strange for us to meet like this, does it not? I feel as if I had come to your house as an uninvited guest.'

'I shall do all in my power to make your

visit agreeable, and shall be unhospitable enough to wish that it may be brief,' answers the captain.

'I am very anxious to know all about my uncle's death,' says Sibyl. 'It was a great shock to me to hear that he was dead. Dr. Mitsand told me that he was in no danger the very day before I left Redcastle. Can it be true that he died from poison?'

'Unhappily there is no room to doubt that,' answers Captain Heathcote, gravely; 'but do not let us talk about this sad business, Mrs. Secretan. Your husband will do all that can be done to protect your interests—to clear your name. Be assured of that, and give your mind as much repose as you can. The inquest will be reopened to-morrow, and you will have to appear.'

'As a criminal—in the dock?' asks Sibyl, with a shudder.

'There is no dock in the coroner's court.'

'My dearest, what does it matter?' says Alexis, soothingly. 'To-morrow's examination will doubtless clear you of this shameful charge. Be patient and trust in God. I am going to call upon your

uncle, Dr. Faunthorpe. I thought perhaps you would like him to come and see you.'

'Yes, I should like to see him very much, if he does not believe that I am——I can't say the dreadful words, Alex. But no, I am sure uncle Robert does not believe in this accusation. Dear soul, he never thought evil of any one.'

'You shall see him, dear, and he shall prescribe for you, unless there is any other medical man whose advice you would rather have.'

'I do not think medicine can do me much good, Alex; but I shall consult any one you wish. But I want to see uncle Robert—to ask him about uncle Stephen's death,—he must know everything; and about the will.'

'Ah, by the way,' exclaims Alexis, 'there was a will, I suppose. And pray who is the gainer of Mr. Trenchard's wealth?'

Captain Heathcote looks at the inquirer with a grave smile.

'Have you heard nothing? Don't you know the particulars?' he asks.

'We know nothing except that Mr. Trenchard is

dead, and is supposed to have been poisoned. Has his will been read yet?'

'His will—or rather, a final statement of his circumstances, briefly set forth in a paper to be read after his death, was made known to two or three people yesterday. As generally happens in Redcastle, what was known to three people in the morning had become town-talk in the evening. Mr. Trenchard has not left sixpence to any one.'

Sibyl's eyes open to their widest. Faintly, dimly during that wearisome night journey she had seen herself cleared from the monstrous charge of murder and possessed of Stephen Trenchard's fortune. His sudden death would have prevented his disinheriting her. Death overtook him before he could have known of her flight.

'Do you mean to say that he has left all his money to hospitals?' exclaimed Alexis.

'I mean to say that he has left no money whatever—or hardly enough for the payment of five shillings in the pound upon his debts. We are very wise in Redcastle, but with all our wisdom are apt to take outward show for reality. Mr. Trenchard

has contrived to impose upon us all. He has been living upon a few thousands taken out of a business on the verge of insolvency, and upon his credit in Redcastle, which was large. Rather hard upon Mrs. Secretan, whom everybody supposed to be his heiress.'

'The policy of his old age is of a piece with the treachery of his youth,' replies Alexis, quietly. 'My wife can afford to do without his money.'

Sibyl sits silent, in utter bewilderment. What phantom has she followed in these years that are gone? To what false idol has she sacrificed love and truth, and duty to husband and child, all fair things that are honourable in woman? Bad enough to have worshipped a golden calf; but to find the calf of basest metal is indeed the lowest depth of humiliation and disgrace.

'Alexis,' she says at last, looking piteously at her husband, 'there never was any one so foolish, so deluded, as I have been. How you must despise me!'

'No, my dear, I am only sorry for you and our mistaken lives, the lost years that can never come back to us.'

CHAPTER XIII.

'BUT HERE IS ONE WHO LOVES YOU AS OF OLD.'

MR. SECRETAN is not sorry to get away from that quiet orderly room in the prison, where never comes any sound of outward things more human than the creaking of the warder's boots in the passage, or the ticking of that inexorable clock in the hall—dismal clock that checks off hours that are heavier than lead, minutes whose every moment is a sigh.

Alexis would willingly stay all day with his wife, to lighten the burden of her solitude, to strengthen the fainting heart with words of cheerfulness and comfort, if he had not work to do elsewhere. He has a task to perform, and a difficult one, and he hardly knows how to set about it. He has been careful to ask no questions of Captain Heathcote, feeling that the governor's position must compel him to caution and reticence. He stands as it were upon the opposite side in that game of

life and death which has to be played out—the rouge et noir of the criminal court. Not to him can Alexis look for information or assistance.

Mr. Secretan leaves the prison sorely perplexed as to what his first step should be. At present he knows nothing, save that Stephen Trenchard is supposed to have died from prussic acid, and that Sibyl has confessed to having had a bottle of prussic acid in her possession at Lancaster Lodge.

'We must meet law with law, I suppose,' thinks Alexis. 'As my wife is in the grip of the law, I must get a lawyer to fight her battle.'

He thinks of the names he has seen in connection with the criminal courts—names that have a sound of power,—and there is one that comes uppermost in his mind, super-eminent and invincible, a shield and buckler in the fight.

This is the legal firm of Levison and Levison, Parchment Street, Viaduct Hill.

He goes straight to the telegraph office, and telegraphs to Messrs. Levison and Levison, solicitors, requesting that one of their firm may start for Redcastle that afternoon, a most urgent case, money

no object. He feels fortified against danger in some measure when he has sent this message, and goes from the station to Dr. Faunthorpe's.

The shabby old house looks a little shabbier and more woebegone than usual to-day in the vivid sunshine of midsummer. Hester, whose spirits generally maintain an equable acidity, has drooped and given way to absolute despair since the revelation of Stephen Trenchard's insolvency. It seems to her as if the shattered fortunes of the house of Faunthorpe had received the final blow that brings them to the dust. Jerusalem besieged by Titus could hardly have fallen lower. The idea of Stephen Trenchard's fortune—to be divided in some manner among his nieces—had been the faithful servant's only day-dream. She had not set her hopes very high. She had languished for no translation to a loftier sphere, but she had believed that a little money would find its way through his nieces to the pockets of Robert Faunthorpe. She had fancied that the dilapidated old house would be painted and whitewashed, some of the worm-eaten flooring replaced with sound wood—new deal—which would

repay the labour of her scrubbing-brush. She had pictured her master in a new coat. She had told herself that a few pounds spent upon the pony carriage would rehabilitate that vehicle, and that a new set of harness would make the pony a gentleman. Long arrears of wages due to herself in times past, a sum that would have doubled itself by this time at compound interest, might possibly be paid in that flood tide of fortune; but this last item was one of secondary consideration in the faithful Hester's mind. She wanted to see the family raise its head from the dust. She wanted to feel that the house of Faunthorpe had something of the phœnix in its nature. The habits of this fabulous bird have been made familiar to Hester, not in the pages of Herodotus, but by the fire office which has taken it for its device and emblem.

The disappointment has been very bitter to the doctor's two younger nieces, and Marion lies on the sofa and bewails her fate, and declares rebelliously that she will never more try to deserve well of Providence.

'What's the use of being good?' she demands,

with an injured air. 'One couldn't be used worse if one was a forger or a murderer. I didn't expect much. Sibyl's artfulness nipped *my* expectations in the bud, but I did build upon getting something, if it was only a paltry five thousand pounds.'

Jenny is more philosophical, and more easily reconciled to Fate.

'If he hadn't any money to leave, he couldn't leave it to us,' she argues, 'but he must have been a sly old fox to make believe to be a millionaire, and take in all Redcastle.'

'A wicked old impostor,' exclaims Marion, wrathfully.

'Poor Sibyl's disappointment will be worse than ours,' says Jane.

'Yes, that's a comfort. She'll find how she has wasted all her scheming and artfulness on a Jesuitical old pauper. She'll feel small enough, I should think.'

'Perhaps she knew the truth all along, and was laughing in her sleeve at our expectations,' suggests Jenny.

'She's deep enough for anything. However, I

forgive her all her baseness now, and pity her with all my heart,' says Marion, with a magnanimous air. 'She'll find life a very different thing now she has seen the last of Lancaster Lodge.'

'I hope she won't get into trouble about that prussic acid,' says Jenny, thoughtfully.

And Marion also grows grave. That question about the prussic acid is serious. One might wish one's sister's unholy pride in temporal blessings to be chastised by Providence, for her own spiritual chastening and benefit, but one would shrink appalled from the idea of that erring sister lying under a suspicion of having poisoned her uncle. In the first place such an imputation would be too severe a punishment for the offender, and in the second it would cast discredit upon all her family.

'It's my opinion that uncle Trenchard has spent all his money, and knew he must be found out if he let things go on any longer, and got out of the difficulty by poisoning himself,' says Jenny, sagely. 'The only thing that's hard to account for is how he could have got hold of the prussic acid that Sibyl took out of the surgery.'

'It mightn't have been that very prussic acid that killed him, stupid,' exclaims Marion, contemptuously.

'True,' says Jenny.

'If you had only held that blabbing tongue of yours nobody need have known that Sibyl had ever taken anything out of the surgery,' says Marion. 'If we are all brought to disgrace it will be your doing.'

Whereat Jenny bursts into tears and weeps dismally for the next half-hour. She has shed many a tear about that fatal communicativeness of hers within the last few days.

They are sitting in the front parlour when this conversation takes place, on the morning of Mr. Secretan's arrival in Redcastle, and when Jenny has wept till her eyeballs ache, she wanders listlessly to the window, and stares out at the small square garden, where the bountiful cabbage roses and a few ancient perennials bloom as well as the dust will allow them. There is not much in the way of traffic at this end of the town. A farmer's cart jolts by once in half an hour, or a labouring man passes

on a plough horse, or a drove of oxen straggles by, hunted by an abusive driver. Not often do the *élite* of Redcastle penetrate to this end of the town. There is not much distraction of mind, therefore, to be obtained from looking out of the window, and Jenny contemplates external things from listlessness rather than interest. But on a sudden, to the surprise of her sister, who has buried herself in a novel, Jenny ejaculates abruptly,—

'Good gracious! It's him.'

'Whatever our family troubles are, you might remember that the verb to be takes the same case after as before it, Jane,' remonstrates Marion with dignity. 'And pray whom do you mean by him?'

'The young man,' cries Jane, incautious in her surprise. 'My brother-in-law.'

'What does the ridiculous child mean?' exclaims Marion, pulling herself up from the sofa with a wrench, and looking out at the gate.

Yes, there is a very good-looking and gentleman-like young man in the act of entering at that modest green gate.

'Why, he's a perfect stranger,' says Marion.

'Is he?' remarks Jenny, who has recovered her self-possession by this time, 'ah, to be sure, now I look at him, I see he is a stranger. I took him for some one else.'

'It's my belief you are demented, child,' cries Marion, crossly. 'I suppose he's a patient for uncle.'

Marion is confirmed in this belief when Mr. Secretan inquires for Dr. Faunthorpe, and on being told that he is out, asks permission to wait his return. He looks respectable, nay, even superior to some of the Redcastle gentry, so Hester shows him into the surgery, and asks him to take a seat.

'The doctor always runs home for his bit of dinner when he can,' she says, 'and I don't think he was going very far to-day, so he'll be in by half an hour or so, I dare say.

Left in the surgery, Alexis thinks of that summer day, nearly a year ago, when he came here in quest of his truant wife, and allowed himself to be put on a false scent by a schoolgirl's deceitfulness. He is very angry with Jane Faunthorpe to-day, when he

thinks that all the evil that has befallen Sibyl might have been prevented had that child told the truth.

'But she had been taught her lesson by Sibyl, no doubt,' he reflects; 'I do wrong to blame her.'

He has more than an hour to wait for Dr. Faunthorpe, a weary while, for he is burning with impatience to know all that can be known about Stephen Trenchard's death. It is past two o'clock when the doctor comes into the surgery looking tired and anxious, and Alexis feels as if much precious time had been lost.

He hastens to introduce himself to Robert Faunthorpe, and to give that bewildered practitioner the history of Sibyl's marriage.

'Sir, you petrify me,' exclaims the meek little doctor, wiping the perspiration from his bald forehead with an ancient silk handkerchief. 'Do you mean to tell me that my niece, whom I have ever considered the incarnation of candour, could be capable of so deceiving me?'

'It was not your resentment she feared, Dr. Faunthorpe, but her uncle Trenchard's antipathy to

my name. You are no doubt acquainted with the family history.'

'Yes, yes, my poor sister-in-law told me the story.'

'That family quarrel of the past was Sibyl's motive for concealing her marriage with me. And now that you know who I am I have to speak of something much more serious. Your niece has been arrested on suspicion of being concerned in her uncle's murder, and is now in Redcastle gaol.'

Dr. Faunthorpe sinks into a chair, speechless with horror. For the last three days and nights he has lived in the apprehension of something like this, but the reality seems more dreadful than his fears.

'Don't tell me so,' he cries.

'It is unhappily the truth. I was with my wife at the time of her arrest. I am here to protect and defend her. And now tell me all you know about Stephen Trenchard's death.'

Dr. Faunthorpe tells all that is to be told—disjointedly at first, but on being closely questioned by Alexis, plainly enough at the last. He tells Alexis the unlucky facts connected with that blue bottle of prussic acid; he tells Alexis the various opinions,

conjectures, and rumours which obtain in Redcastle.

'Why should he not have poisoned himself?' asks Alexis.

'Ah, we might have supposed that; but then comes the question of the bottle, or vessel from which he took the poison. With so powerful a dose death would have been instantaneous; he would not have had time to throw the bottle from him; he must have died clutching it. And the empty bottle was found in Sibyl's work-basket.'

'Where it might have been easily placed by any one who wished to fix the guilt upon her.'

'Yes, of course. If we could only prove that.'

'We must prove that, Dr. Faunthorpe. We must find the poisoner, or show that Stephen Trenchard took the poison of his own free will. He may have felt that his game was played out, and may have adopted suicide as a happy escape out of his difficulties.'

'That might be.'

Alexis has made notes of Dr. Faunthorpe's answers to his questions. He has made a list of

the people in the house at the time of Stephen Trenchard's death.

'How about this Joel Pilgrim? Why should he not be suspected rather than Sibyl?'

'There is that unfortunate circumstance of Sibyl's flight, and the prussic acid taken from this surgery.'

'Both facts tell against her. Yet, if she had been guilty she would have been too wise to excite suspicion by that secret departure; and if she had wanted to commit murder she would hardly have chosen a poison which she must have known is of all poisons the most easily detected.'

Dr. Faunthorpe's only answer is a hopeless sigh. He is borne down, nay, crushed, by calamity. Whatever elasticity of spirit Nature may have endowed him with at the outset of life has been worn out of him by a long career of self-abnegation and endurance. He is so accustomed to trouble sorrow is such a common flavour in his cup, that he cannot easily look beyond the darkness of the hour. To-day he sees himself enclosed in an impenetrable cloud of misery. Freely, gladly would he give his

life—such feeble remnant of life as he holds—to save his niece, but he cannot devise any mode of being helpful to her.

'This Pilgrim must be the man,' says Alexis, after reading over his notes meditatively.

'I cannot see any motive——'

'Can you not? He may have believed in Treuchard's wealth, and expected to inherit some of it. He may have wanted money badly, and determined on hastening his inheritance.

'There is one little circumstance that I ought, perhaps, to have told you,' begins the doctor, falteringly.

'For God's sake tell me everything.'

'It was after the post-mortem. Dr. Mitsand, who has taken up this matter in a very energetic spirit, asked a few questions of the butler at Lancaster Lodge.'

'Well?'

'The questions themselves were of no particular importance—touching the position of a table beside the bed, the bottles and glasses, and so on. But there was something in the man's manner which struck Dr. Mitsand and myself as remarkable. He

had been drinking, I believe, and may have been muddled by drink. But he had, to my mind, and Dr. Mitsand's, the manner of a person labouring under some kind of apprehension. He had a shifty look, and answered the simplest questions reluctantly, as if afraid to commit himself. At the coroner's inquest he appeared in the same muddled state—worse indeed, and drew upon himself a severe reprimand from the coroner.'

'Is the man still at Lancaster Lodge?'

'Yes. I saw him go in at the lodge gate to-day as I came past on my way home.'

'Then I'll see him without delay, and see what is to be made of him,' says Alexis.

'In a case of such importance would it not be better to employ a detective?' suggests the doctor, humbly.

'Dr. Faunthorpe, in a case that affects my wife's honour and her life there is no detective living whose wits would be keener than mine,' replies Alexis. 'I will trust no one with this work while I have power to do it myself.'

And thus they part.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALEXIS INVESTIGATES.

BEFORE going to Lancaster Lodge, Alexis goes back to the jail, and spends half an hour with his wife. He feels that it would be cruel to leave her all through the long lonely day. He finds her curiously patient and quiet, resigned to the horror of her position, and touchingly grateful for his interest in her.

'It is a strange end to all my dreams, Alexis,' she says sadly. 'I fancied that when our reconciliation came life would be full of brightness for us. I have comforted myself in many a lonely hour with the thought of our reunion. We should be fabulously rich, free as air, with all the world and its pleasures before us. The reality is strikingly different from the day-dream, is it not? No freedom, no wealth. Our reconciliation finds me a prisoner and a pauper.'

'The prison will not be for long, dear, and I have fortune enough for both of us. So you need not regret your day-dream about Stephen Trenchard's wealth, a factor which had no real existence in the sum of our lives.'

'Why did I not learn wisdom from my spelling-book, that dog's-eared old spelling-book, with fables for reading lessons?' says Sibyl, with her faint smile. 'I am like the dog in the fable, who dropped the substance to snatch the shadow.'

She asks no questions as to his morning's occupation. She seems in no manner to realize the peril of her situation, and the urgency of prompt action. Perhaps she is more womanly in this hour of trial than she has been at any other crisis of her life. Alexis has forgiven her. That is the one fact she dwells upon most, and the danger and horror of her position touch her lightly. That which she feels most bitterly is to know herself the dupe of her own avarice, fooled to the top of her bent by false appearances, mocked at perhaps in secret by the insolvent Belial of her worship.

'Love is better than gold or silver, Alexis,' she

says, resting her languid head upon her husband's shoulder.

'Poets, philosophers, and sages have been singing that chorus ever since the world began, Sibyl. Yet there are a good many people left who set their affections on filthy lucre, and, however much we may abuse it, that yellow ore which keeps the world moving has some good uses as well as evil ones. And now I must leave you for an hour or two. I have some more business to get through in your lively town. You will not be alone all the afternoon, dear. Dr. Faunthorpe is coming to see you.'

'Dear uncle Robert! Oh, Alex! how I hate myself when I remember my neglect of that dear good man, while I paid my court to an impostor! And yet, perhaps, I have no right to say that. I have been thinking over the past as I sat here this morning, and I see that I have been self-deceived rather than the dupe of uncle Trenchard. He never told me that he meant to make me his heiress. He never told me that he had a great fortune to leave. It was other people who deceived me. Those Stormonts and their set, always harping upon one string,

courting me and flattering me as the heiress elect. I have little right to blame my uncle. He did not know how much I had sacrificed for his sake. He did not know how false and wicked a part I was playing. He was anxious that I should make a rich marriage, that I should profit by the false appearances that surrounded me, and establish myself before he died. He meant kindly by that at any rate.'

'We will say no harm of the dead, my dear. And now good-bye for a few hours.'

Alexis meets Dr. Faunthorpe on his way out. The good little man has only stopped to perform some necessary duties in the dispensing line before hastening to his niece.

From Redcastle Jail to Lancaster Lodge is only ten minutes' walk. Alexis has no difficulty in finding the mansion which he came to six months ago in the winter dusk, for Lancaster Lodge has made itself unusually conspicuous to-day, having put on a breastplate of auctioneer's bills, announcing that all the elegant furniture, brass bedsteads, superior bedding, German spring mattresses, best Brussels, Axminster,

velvet pile, and other carpeting, glass, china, pictures, electro-plated goods, valuable library of standard authors, grand piano by Broadwood,. patent lawn-mowing machine, knife-cleaning apparatus, and other household effects, together with the valuable lease of the mansion, at a moderate rent, are to be disposed of by public auction on Monday next, July 3rd, and three following days, the whole to be on view on the previous Saturday, admission by catalogue, price one shilling.

This is Thursday, and Alexis resolves to ask for a private view of the mansion. The request may be a little out of order perhaps, but a judicious distribution of half-crowns will, in all probability, remove difficulties. This man, Podmore, the late Mr. Trenchard's butler, is doubtless in charge of the house.

Alexis makes his application at the lodge-gate, where the lodgekeeper's wife has taken prompt advantage of Mr. Trenchard's death to hang out her family linen on the laurels and conifers in the shrubbery.

'It's a comfort to do a bit of washing in freedom,'

this matron has remarked to her liege lord, the head gardener. 'Mr. Trenchard were so partikeller.'

'Partikeller,' growls the husband. 'He were a man that allus wanted eighteenpennorth o' work for a shillin'. I don't call that there partikeller. Seems to me that there breed's raythor common.'

Mollified by half-a-crown, the guardians of the gate are of opinion that Mr. Secretan can see the house.

'It ain't the day,' says the gardener, scratching his head doubtfully; 'you'll see wot's wrote up on they bills—Saturday. But if you're only passin' through and wanted to see if there's anythink you'd like to bid for, I dessay as they might strain a pint up at the house. There's old Podmore, the butler, a very pertikler old party, but still he's ameliable to reason.'

Alexis, having passed the outer gate of the citadel, goes straight to the hall door, where he finds Mr. Podmore sunning himself on the threshold, cadaverous and flaccid of aspect, as a man who has been living for the last few days upon gin-and-water, and slovenly in his apparel—as a man who, having

retired from official life, feels that he has no occasion to be punctilious in the use of soap and water. To him Alexis makes his request.

'There are some pictures that I want to see,' he says, 'and, as I am only passing through the town, I shall be much obliged if you can let me see them to-day.'

He accompanies the request with a dexterous passage of half-a-sovereign from his fingers to Podmore's palm—quite a delicate feat in prestigiation.

Podmore turns his gin-and-watery eyes upon the applicant with a puzzled air, dimly recalling that face and voice as in some wise familiar to him on the blurred page of memory. But memory's page is so much blotted that he vainly strives to decipher the imperfect record.

'Ain't I seen you before somewhere?' he asks, feebly.

'Very possibly,' replies Alexis.

'You ain't been a visitor here in the old gentleman's time?'

'No.'

'Then it must have been in some former situ-

ation. Yes, you can see the pictures. There's no harm in that. Not that the pictures are good for much—reg'lar Wardour Street duffers supplied by the upholsterer, old Kabriole, and now he's served an attachment on the goods as chief creditor. He's been let in nicely, has old Kabriole. The 'ouse-keeper 'll show you round. There's only me and her left in the 'ouse now, and it's very lonesome. In fack,' adds Podmore, confidentially, 'it's undermining my spirits. I feel that low, I could shed tears by the pailful.'

'Yes,' replies Alexis, watchful of the butler's countenance. 'It must be dreary work living in a house where a foul crime has been committed—the foulest of crimes, secret murder.'

Podmore looks uncomfortable at this, but he hardly realizes Mr. Secretan's idea of a man stricken with the sense of guilt. But then there are some criminals so callous, some men with whom crime is, as it were, a natural development; and from these the agonies of remorse, the throes and convulsions of a guilt-burdened soul, are not to be looked for. Had not Nemesis overtaken William Palmer, in the person

of his latest victim's stepfather, that practised plotter against the lives of his friends and relatives would, doubtless, have gone on driving his profitable trade, and gone down to the grave jaunty and debonnaire, liked and trusted by his comrades, the jolly good fellow of his jovial circle. Be sure no tell-tale muscle of Mr. Palmer's face assisted the task of detection, no quiver of that iron lip betrayed the hand of the poisoner as he presented the fatal draught to the lips of his friend. Phrenology has declared that in that man's brain the capacity for pity or remorse was wanting.

'The 'ousekeeper 'll take you round,' repeats Podmore, slipping the half-sbvereign into his pocket.

Podmore's eyes are dull and watery, and his breath is flavoured with juniper berries, or it may be turpentine; his limbs are heavy, and he is averse from motion. He calls a thin and vinegar-faced female, whose temper has been soured by a life-long devotion to the kitchen stove, and an apparatus she describes as a 'bang Mary'—a large metal tray, containing a family of stew-pans of various sizes, in which sauces, glazes, and divers savoury compositions

simmer gently in a perpetual warm bath. The bain Marie and the stove together have been too much for Mrs. Skinner's temper, which is disagreeably suggestive of that fiery region she has so long inhabited.

'This gentleman wants to have a look round the house,' says Podmore, in those thick and hazy tones which have become habitual to him.

'Then he must come on the proper day,' replies Mrs. Skinner, snappishly.

'Oh, but it's all right; he's got a horder. You're to show him everythink.'

Mrs. Skinner looks doubtful; but on a solemn wink from the hazy Podmore, yields the point, expectant of largess.

'You can come this way,' she says to Alexis, with scant courtesy.

'I should like to see the room in which Mr. Trenchard died,' says Alexis, when he has surveyed the drawing-room and dining-room, dismal tabernacles of upholstery.

'I hope you haven't come out of curiosity,' says Mrs. Skinner, reproachfully. 'It's the first time *I* ever lived in a house where there was suspicion of

murder, and it's very trying to my feelings. My father was a respectable tradesman. I wasn't brought up to this sort of thing.'

'Curiosity has not brought me here,' replies Alexis, 'but I have a particular desire to see the room in which Mr. Trenchard died.'

He is about to say, 'and to hear all you can tell me about his death,' but it strikes him that Mrs. Skinner, despite her acid countenance, will talk freely of her own accord presently, not for his gratification, but for the relief of her own pent-up feelings. He politely offers her half a sovereign, which she take swith a curtsey, and as near an approach to a smile as her features can shape.

'Thank you kindly, sir. I won't deny that it is acceptable, finding one's self suddenly out of place, and disappointed of any little legacy one had a right to expect. I'm sure the pains I took with the old gentleman's curries was quite wearing to my nerves —scraped cocoa-nuts, and prawns, and chutnee, and oysters, and all manner of fiddle-faddle, and his Bombay ducks, and his rubbish; but he's gone to his last account, and will have to answer for 'em all, I

make no doubt, and for his deception towards his servants.'

'And his favourite niece,' suggests Alexis. 'The deception came hardest upon her.'

'Ah!' sighs Mrs. Skinner, pursing up her lips. 'When young folks hold their heads too high, Providence is apt to lay snares and pitfalls for them. We've king David's word for that in the Psalms.'

Alexis remembers that 'a favourite has no friends.'

The housekeeper, considerably mollified by the stranger's liberality, leads the way to Mr. Trenchard's bedchamber, where the furniture has a gloomy and even shabby look since the auctioneer's men have overhauled it—everything pushed out of its place and twisted the wrong way, defaced with lot numbers, degraded from its pride and pomp. The bedstead heaped with an untidy pile of bedding, bundles of blankets, tumbled counterpane and sheeting. Things that careful housewives think they ought to get very cheaply under such conditions, but which generally cost the feminine bargain-hunter

more than if they came straight from a draper's shop.

Alexis notices the door by the head of the bed.

'There is a second door to Mr. Trenchard's room, I see,' he remarks.

'Yes, sir.'

'Was that always unlocked?'

'Yes, that was kept unlocked for Podmore to come down to give Mr. Trenchard his medicine.'

Mrs. Skinner opens the door and shows Alexis the landing on the back staircase, and the flight of stairs leading to Podmore's room. There are two more doors that open on to this landing. Alexis inquires about these.

'That one opens into Mr. Trenchard's dressing-room,' replies Mrs. Skinner, 'and this,' indicating the further door, 'into Mr. Pilgrim's room.'

Alexis opens this last door and looks into Mr. Pilgrim's apartment, a comfortable bachelor's room, with another door opening into the gallery at the top of the principal staircase. Lancaster Lodge belongs to a period of domestic architecture in which architects delighted in the multiplication of doors,

and if prevented by untoward conditions from putting in real doors consoled themselves by filling in their blank corners with ornamental dummies leading to nowhere.

'Mr. Trenchard's room was as easily accessible to Mr. Pilgrim as to the butler,' says Alexis. 'And now show me Miss Faunthorpe's rooms.'

Mrs. Skinner obeys, and Alexis finds that, taking into consideration that Mr. Trenchard's door of communication with the gallery was locked on the inside on the night of his death, Sibyl could only have entered his apartment by going down the principal staircase, opening a door which Mrs. Skinner declares to have been always locked after ten o'clock in the evening, and the key in her possession, crossing a lobby, and ascending the servants' staircase.

Stay, there is another way; if Stephen Trenchard's dressing-room has a door opening on the gallery.

He hastens to ascertain this. No, there are two doors to the dressing-room, but neither communicates with the gallery. One opens into the bedroom, the other on to the landing before mentioned.

This must surely make a strong point in Sibyl's favour. While all communication between her room and her uncle's was cut off in the night-time, Joel Pilgrim and Podmore had easy access to the dead man's bedchamber.

To this argument a counsel for the prosecution might reply that the poison was possibly put ready for the patient's own hand, on the eve of the murder, mixed with his drink or his medicine.

Yet in the latter case, Podmore, who administered the poison, must have seen its deadly effect; unless the man were, as Alexis supposes, an habitual drunkard, and too far gone on this occasion to take notice of his master's condition. This seems too much to believe. Even stupid drunkenness would have sense enough to perceive the effect of a deadly and instantaneous poison.

Alexis sees Sibyl's boudoir, where the prussic acid bottle was found in the work-basket. Might it not, he asks himself, have been taken from that basket full, and returned to it empty, by some other hand than Sibyl's? And yet how should any one else have known of her possession of the poison?

The housekeeper has been obligingly communicative. She has entered into all the details of Stephen Trenchard's last illness and death, dwelling on the gloomiest particulars with that ghoul-like relish peculiar to women of her kind. She has described the finding of the body—its awful appearance—Miss Faunthorpe's mysterious flight, 'which naturally set folks against her.'

'You don't surely believe her to have had anything to do with her uncle's death?' cries Alexis.

Mrs. Skinner shakes her head solemnly, till the crape roses and jet ornaments in her cap—she has brought out some dingy weeds laid by from a previous time of mourning—tremble and shiver.

'I don't like to express an opinion as a Christian woman,' she says, 'but the opinion in Redcastle is that Miss Faunthorpe did it. She had the poison—there's no denying that—and she got it in an underhand way, and then on the very morning of her uncle's death she runs away, secretly—and no one knows where she's gone.'

'A way to proclaim her guilt, which she would

hardly have taken if she were guilty. She would not be so short-sighted as that.'

'Murderers generally are short-sighted,' replies Mrs. Skinner, sagely. 'It's a merciful dispensation of Providence by which they run their necks into nooses. There's not much good could be done by the detective police if it wasn't for the short-sightedness of criminals.'

'That's a very wise remark, Mrs. Skinner, and I'm surprised that so sensible a woman as you can imagine that poor girl guilty of a crime which only a hardened sinner could conceive.'

'There's no knowing where to look for hardened sinners,' replies the housekeeper. 'Ministers wouldn't tell us about original sin in the pulpit if wickedness wasn't born with some of us. And as to good looks, they're no criterion. Black thoughts may lie behind pretty faces as well as ugly ones.'

And Alexis foresees that, with the female community in Redcastle, Sibyl's beauty will be no certificate of innocence. He pursues the subject no further, seeing that loose conjectures of Mrs.

Skinner's will in no wise help in the unravelling of this tangled skein.

'I rather wonder,' he says, thoughtfully, stil moving about the empty rooms, and making believe to examine the furniture, 'that Mr. Trenchard should have employed your fellow-servant as his attendant in illness. I should have supposed from his manner to-day that he was somewhat inclined to drinking.'

'Ah,' says Mrs. Skinner. 'Well, you may think so, for of all the sots that ever was, there never was a stupider sot than Joseph Podmore has been since his master's death.'

'Since,' cries Alexis. 'Was he sober before then?'

'Yes, sir. Joseph and me has been fellow-servants here since Mr. Trenchard took this house, three and a half years ago, and I must say that Joseph Podmore has never laid himself open to reproach in all that time. Not but what he liked his beer at dinner and supper, and his tumbler of grog after supper, and a glass of dry sherry wine with his mouthful of bread and cheese between

breakfast and dinner, but was never the worse for anything he took.'

'And since his master's death——'

'He has never been properly sober, muddling himself with gin and beer—dog's nose, he calls it, and the very lowness of the name is enough to set any decent person against the stuff, let alone its being cold and comfortless to the inside, all day long, and that low in his spirits, that it's a misery to be in his company.'

'Low-spirited?' asks Alexis.

'Awful; and yet, according to his own account, things have prospered with him, for he says he's going to take a public-house, and begin life as an independent gentleman directly he leaves here; though how he can have saved money to go into business, seeing that he has a wife and two children to keep out of his wages, and she an extravagant drab into the bargain, flaunting about after dark with a Paisley shawl down to her heels, and a black lace bonnet with roses in it, and a baby in one arm and a market basket over the other, which I call out of keeping,—how Podmore

can have saved money with such a drag upon him is more than I can account for.'

Again it flashes upon Alexis that this man is the murderer. Every word of Mrs. Skinner's tends to confirm him in that idea. He pushes his inquiry a stage further.

'By the way,' he begins, 'have you any idea whether Mr. Trenchard had money about him at time of his death? May he not have had a sum of money in his possession at that time—sufficient to offer a temptation to an assassin? Murders have been inspired by very small temptations of that kind.'

'I know that, sir. But I don't see how Mr. Trenchard can have had much ready money about him. He had no call for it. He always paid everything by cheque—even servants' wages. And it wasn't often that he paid the tradesmen anything except at Christmas-time. I don't see what he could have wanted with ready money in the house.'

'You never heard of his keeping money in his room, or saw him open a box, desk, or drawer containing money?'

'Never.'

'Had he any valuable jewellery in his possession?'

'I never saw him wear so much as a diamond ring. His watch was all the jewellery he ever wore, and that was found under his pillow.'

This seems a kind of no thoroughfare. If Mr. Trenchard had no valuables to tempt Podmore's cupidity, why should the butler have murdered him, and whence the talk about taking a public-house, since it is clear from Mrs. Skinner's account of Podmore's domestic responsibilities that he can hardly have saved money. A slatternly wife in a flaunting Paisley shawl, marketing after dark, is as exhaustive a drain upon a husband's finances as the bottomless bucket of the Danaides.

'One thing about money I do remember,' exclaims Mrs. Skinner after a pause; 'and I must say it struck me as singular after I'd heard about that paper in which Mr. Trenchard declared he had only brought ten thousand pounds from India.'

'What was that?' asks Alexis, eagerly.

'Well, it was the last night but one before his death. I was going up to bed, after locking my downstairs doors and seeing all the others up before me—even to Podmore,—which was always my way, and as I passed this door about ten minutes, or it might have been a quarter of an hour after the others had gone to bed—for I'd been hunting for our tabby cat, which is a troublesome animal to have prowling about at night, though a good mouser and an affectionate disposition, and I was coming up in the dark, the gas being turned off at the main—when I saw master's door ajar, the door opening on our staircase, you understand. It was just the least bit ajar, leaving a narrow streak of light, and I heard Mr. Pilgrim's voice speaking as I came upstairs, and then I heard master say, "Now understand clearly, Joel, I must have that money —ten thousand in bank notes—before the wedding. There must be no shilly-shallying. You don't marry my niece till that money is in my hands. No money, no marriage, remember; and the telegram to wind up the business goes to my Calcutta agents on Saturday unless the money is forthcoming." He

had a very sharp, precise way of speaking, poor old gentleman, and I heard every syllable.'

A new light flashes on Alexis. This Pilgrim, the odious persecutor of his wife, may not he be the murderer? The idea has presented itself to him before, but he has put it aside for want of any motive to ascribe as the mainspring of the action. But there is motive strong enough supplied in these words of Stephen Trenchard's. This threat to communicate with an agent in Calcutta might mean ruin to Joel Pilgrim. He must have been in some way in Trenchard's power. And to murder Trenchard would be to cut the knot of the difficulty.

Alexis Secretan's heart beats loud and fast. He feels as if he were now on the right track. That there is something mysterious—nay, guilty—in the butler's conduct, he is assured; but the butler may be an accessory before or after the fact, rather than a principal. There is apparent, as yet, no sufficient motive for the butler's guilt; there is an obvious motive if this Pilgrim be the murderer.

'The first thing now to be done is to find out all about this man,' thinks Alexis.

'Where is Mr. Pilgrim staying?' he asks. 'He has not left the town, has he?'

'No, sir. He is residing at the "Coach and Horses." He was to have sailed for India directly after his marriage. That's why things were arranged so sudden. But of course Mr. Trenchard's death altered all that.'

'At the "Coach and Horses,"' says Alexis. 'That is where I mean to put up myself.'

'You couldn't do better, sir. It's the best hotel in Redcastle.'

And now, having accomplished all he can for the time being, Alexis takes leave of Mrs. Skinner.

'I should like to have another look at the pictures before I leave the town,' he says. 'Perhaps you would not object to my looking round again to-morrow morning?'

'You are freely welcome, sir, as often as you like. When I see that a gentleman *is* a gentleman, I'm very happy to oblige him.'

Alexis goes from Lancaster Lodge to the 'Coach and Horses,' whence he has addressed his telegram to Messrs. Levison and Levison. He is delighted to

find a member of that firm waiting for him in the coffee-room, an undersized gentleman, with a smooth sallow face and keen black eyes, thin lips, compressed and horizontal.

'A junior in the house,' thinks Alexis, with a look of disappointnent. He would have desired age and experience to guide and aid him in this desperate strait. 'He looks a shrew dlittle fellow though, and I dare say he knows his business.'

He takes Mr. Levison off to a private room, orders a bottle of dry sherry, and then proceeds to state his case without delay or waste of words.

Mr. Levison listens with quiet intentness, and makes no remark till the story is finished. Even then he is provokingly slow to express himself. He sits looking at Alexis like the head of Memnon, and compels his client to ring his ideas out of him by the closest questioning; and as he pauses for the space of a minute, looking his stoniest, after each question, this process is rather slow.

'Do you think Pilgrim is the man?' asks Alexis.

A long pause. Alexis repeats his question, no

gleam of light in Mr. Levison's countenance indicating that the inquiry has been heard.

'If he were the man he could have got away by this time.'

Even when Mr. Levison does speak he drops out his words charily through scarcely parted lips, as if they were pearls and diamonds, and he did not like to waste them.

'True. But he might wish to throw people off the scent by remaining.'

'Dangerous that. He had ample excuse for going. His Indian voyage was arranged before Mr. Trenchard's death. He only had to carry out the arrangement. There would have been nothing suspicious in that. He is in this house, you say?'

'Yes.'

'That's convenient. We can keep an eye upon him.'

'I can't see how we are to do that,' grumbles Alexis, provoked by his solicitor's phlegmatic tone, 'unless we could see through doors or walls. He may leave Redcastle while we are sitting here.'

'No, he won't,' replies Mr. Levison. 'I brought

a clerk of mine down with me, and he has got the office to look after Pilgrim.'

'But how could you know anything about him till I told you——'

'Do you suppose I waited for you to tell me That's not our way in Parchment Street. I had a chat with the landlord—heard all about your wife's arrest, and guessed what I was wanted for, heard all the particulars of the murder, or supposed murder, the inquest held in this house, and so on, and gave my man the office.'

'And you think that Pilgrim——'

'I never think, Mr. Secretan; I wait for facts. If I squandered my brains upon thought I should have no brain power left to deal with evidence. We shall hear what comes out at the inquest.'

Alexis has to take this vague comfort for what it is worth, and make the best of it. He and Mr. Levison dine together, and then Alexis goes back to the jail and spends another half-hour with Sibyl, who is low-spirited, but not so anxious or fearful as she might naturally be in so awful a position.

'Uncle Robert has been here, dear good man,'

she tells Alexis, 'and has been feeling my pulse, and looking at my tongue, and prescribing tonics, and port wine, and beef tea, and all manner of tiresome things. He quite broke down when he saw me here, and burst into tears—the first I ever saw him shed. It gave me more pain to see him than anything that has happened since last night, when I thought you had shut me out of your heart for ever.'

'I thought so too, Sibyl; but sorrow has opened the door of my heart and let you in again.'

'Ah!' she exclaims, with a little joyful cry, 'I thought you could not be long unkind. And you have not forgotten those foolish early days when we walked in Kensington Gardens, and you told the children fairy tales.'

'No, love, I have forgotten nothing.'

'I will show you something some day, Alex, if ever this dreadful suspicion passes away, and I am free from the charge of murder.'

She shudders at the word, and clings to him for a moment like a frightened child.

'What will you show me, dear?'

'A book—such a foolish old book—in which I kept a journal when I first began to care for you. It is all written there, every stupid thing I ever thought about you.'

'The rise and fall, the ebb and flow, of love. That must be a precious volume, Sibyl. I would give a great deal to see it.'

'You will laugh——'

'I am more likely to cry—remembering how Fate has parted us since then.'

CHAPTER XV.

MR. LEVISON CROSS-EXAMINES.

THE inquest is resumed on the following day at eleven, in a room closely packed with eager spectators, among whom the *élite* of Redcastle are to be distinguished. The *élite* are deeply interested in the issue of this inquiry. Have they not taken Sibyl, as it were, to their bosoms, admitted her to those sacred hearths where never lowered the shadow of evil, and is it not incumbent upon her, for their sakes, for their untainted reputes, to clear herself of this hideous charge? Her own shame, her own guilt, her own undeserved agony, if innocent, are of secondary consideration. 'She has visited *us!*' cry the *élite*. 'How dreadful it will be for us if it turns out that she has poisoned her uncle! People will say they met her in *our* houses. Quite a disgrace to happen to one, dear Mrs. Stormont,' says Mrs Groshen. 'Actually humiliating, my dear,' replies Mrs. Stormont.

The prevailing opinion in Redcastle is that Sibyl has done the deed. Perhaps had Stephen Trenchard endowed her with a million of money popular feeling might have leaned the other way. It is difficult to suppose that the possessor of a million can err. The property qualification, once necessary to members of Parliament—so many hundred per annum as a pledge of respectability—runs through life. Qualified with a million, no one could have imagined Sibyl a poisoner. But disappointed, deluded, penniless, an abject failure—as much a disappointment to her friends as to herself—Sibyl now appears in the light of a base and insidious schemer, who has well merited the disappointment of her schemes.

And what is this last revelation? asks Redcastle indignantly, when the story of Mr. Secretan's arrival at the jail with his wife gets, no one knows how, into active circulation,—what is this about a husband? What! She has been deceiving us all this time. She has been parading herself in fine dresses, which may never be paid for, she has been spreading her silken train like a peacock's tail, and

showing herself off in her false colours as an unmarried woman to the detriment of *our* daughters. She has been exercising her wicked fascinations upon *our* sons. She has flirted with our husbands even, and has taken us all in with her pretended innocence and affected girlishness.

'The husband must be as bad as the wife,' says Redcastle, and various are the speculations and statements as to Mr. Secretan's character.

The inquest begins, and here he is, standing behind his wife's chair as she sits in the place of the accused, the focus of every pitiless eye, eyes that have once looked kindly at her, eyes that have admired. There is Fred Stormont, with his mouth open, standing on tiptoe to look over his father's shoulder, as if he were at a play. Stay, there is one face not quite unpitying. Dr. Mitsand sits yonder near the coroner, grave, watchful, and with a look which Sibyl takes for sympathy.

'Really, a handsome young man,' whispers Mrs. Stormont through that thick veil of hers to Mrs. Groshen. 'He looks like a gentleman, too.'

'Rather the air of an adventurer, I fancy,' replies Mrs. Groshen.

The witnesses are examined, and there is much repetition of evidence given on the previous examination. Joel Pilgrim, calm, precise, and faultless of intonation, relates the discovery of Mr. Trenchard's death.

'At what hour had you last seen him alive?' inquires the coroner.

'At ten o'clock on the previous evening, when I bade him good night.'

'You had access to him at any hour of the night, I believe?' interposes Mr. Levison.

Joel looks at the questioner somewhat insolently.

'Am I to answer this person's questions?' he inquires of the coroner.

'Yes, so long as they are relevant to the case.'

'I don't know what you mean by having access,' answers Joel. 'Mr. Trenchard's bedroom door was locked. There was a second door, but that opened on a back landing, and was only used by the butler.'

'But it was equally convenient for you, had you

wanted to see Mr. Trenchard in the night, I think,' says Mr. Levison.

'I don't see that,' answers Joel, curtly.

'Don't you? Allow me to make the fact clearer to you. Here is a little plan of the landing on the back staircase.' He exhibits a sheet of cartridge paper, with a ground plan in pen and ink. 'Here are doors numbered 1, 2, 3. No. 1, Mr. Trenchard's bedroom; No. 2, his dressing-room; No. 3, your bedroom. You perceive that from the secondary door of your bedroom to the secondary door of Mr. Trenchard's bedroom is but a step.'

'That is right enough, but I never entered Mr. Trenchard's room by that secondary door.'

'What, not upon the night but one before the murder, when you had an important conversation with Mr. Trenchard upon financial matters,—a conversation which was overheard by a witness I shall produce by-and-bye—overheard in consequence of your having left that secondary door ajar?'

Mr. Levison looks fixedly at the witness as he asks this question; Mr. Secretan's eyes are also turned upon that tawny countenance, and every eye

in the court follows those other eyes. A curious change comes over that dusky complexion of Mr. Pilgrim's. It is not pallor, but rather a deeper tint of olive, which makes him look like a sufferer in an advanced stage of yellow jaundice.

'Did you make use of that secondary door?' asks Levison.

'Never!' replies the witness, resolutely.

'And you have no recollection of that particular conversation?'

'I can recall no particular conversation of the kind. Mr. Trenchard and I had been in business together, and had many conversations upon financial matters.'

'Was not some of Mr. Trenchard's capital engaged in your business at the time of his death?'

'Mr. Trenchard took all he could take out of the business when he left Calcutta.'

'But he still retained a share in the business, and had a claim to his share of profits arising therefrom?'

'What can my business relations have to do with this inquiry?' exclaims Joel, angrily. 'These questions are simply impertinent. We are here to ascertain the cause of Mr. Trenchard's death.'

'I beg your pardon,' replies Levison, sharply. 'Medical evidence has established the cause of death. We are here to find out who killed him,—and to get at the murderer we have to discover the motive. I venture to affirm that no motive can be ascribed to the lady now under arrest.'

The name of Levison is such a power in the criminal court that the Redcastle coroner, who might have restricted the inquiries of a lesser man, allows Mr. Levison full licence. The coroner, being a medical man, has not that affection for legal formulas which distinguishes some of his brother officials, and is content to let another man have his share in the development of the case.

Podmore is the next witness examined. He has not forgotten the coroner's reproof, and has brought his mind to as near an approach to sobriety as it is possible for a brain so steeped in alcohol to arrive at on short notice. He gives pretty much the same evidence as he gave on the previous occasion; and of him Mr. Levison asks no questions.

Next comes a witness whose appearance causes a feeling of compunction even in those minds most

set against the accused. This is Jane Faunthorpe, who stands before the assembly in her black frock and black straw hat—cheap mourning provided by the parish doctor's scanty purse—with her face paler than it has ever been seen before, and her eyelids swollen with weeping.

She has but one feeling, and that is the conviction that Sibyl is to be hung, and that the hanging will be in some measure her own work. She has not forgotten that speech of her uncle's about her having put a rope round her sister's neck.

She looks at Sibyl piteously, her eyes brimming with tears, and the corners of her mouth remorsefully depressed.

'I can't help it, Sibyl,' she whispers. 'It isn't my fault.'

'Do you know the nature of an oath, my dear?' asks the coroner.

'I know that it is very dreadful, and one mustn't do it,' replies the tearful child.

The question is explained to her, and the oath administered, and then comes the ordeal. She is made to tell everything, reluctantly and with many

tears. She gives a detailed account of Sibyl's visit to the surgery, and her own remarks about the odour of bitter almonds.

'But I know why she took that horrid stuff,' adds Jane. 'It wasn't to poison uncle Trenchard, but to poison herself, poor dear thing, and I know why she wanted to poison herself.'

'Really, Mr. Coroner,' interposes Joel, 'if these childish speculations are to be admitted as evidence ——'

'"Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,"' says the coroner, gravely. 'Let the little girl tell us her opinion. It can do no harm.'

'I know that Sibyl was very unhappy,' pursues Jane, eagerly. 'Uncle Trenchard wanted her to marry him,' pointing to Joel.

'You must not point at people,' says the coroner. You must tell us whom you mean.'

'Well, then, Mr. Pilgrim. Uncle Trenchard wanted her to marry Mr. Pilgrim, and she didn't like him, and couldn't have married him if she had liked him, because she had a husband already, and there he is,' pointing to Alexis, 'and how he can let

his wife be taken up for murder is more than I can understand,' concludes Jane, indignantly.

'And you think your sister may have taken that poison with an idea of destroying herself?' inquires the coroner.

'I'm almost sure she did.'

'When we have done with these expressions of juvenile opinion I suppose we shall pass on to actual evidence?' says Joel, with a sneer.

'You and I are at one as to the object of this inquiry, I hope, Mr. Pilgrim,' replies the coroner, gravely.

Mr. Levison asks more questions of Jenny, all tending to show Sibyl's distress of mind at the time of her abstracting the poison, and that this distress was occasioned by her uncle's endeavour to force her into a marriage with his friend.

'It was quite dreadful at the last,' says Jane. 'Things were to be huddled up anyhow. She was to be married after a few days' notice, without a single bridesmaid, or a wedding dress, or anything, and then to go out to India. And she had a husband already, and so what could she do but poison herself or run away?'

After this, Jenny is dismissed, and retires weeping. On the whole she has made an impression in Sibyl's favour, except upon some of the feminine members of the audience, Mrs. Stormont in particular, who whispers to Mrs. Groshen,—

'That girl is a mass of deception;' to which the banker's wife nods acquiescence, though not very clear as to whether 'that girl' means Sibyl or Jenny.

Sibyl keeps her seat meanwhile, pale but very calm. She gives an upward look at her husband now and then in the course of the proceedings, a look that is full of trustful affection, and which goes straight to the heart of Sir Wilford Cardonnel, who surveys the scene from the back of the crowd at the other side of the room. Sir Wilford would give much to be in Mr. Secretan's place, ay, although that awful suspicion hung over his wife. The possibility of Sibyl's guilt has never entered his mind, although Phœbe and Lavinia have been loud in their denunciations, and have gone so far as to say that they saw 'secret poisoner' written upon Miss Faunthorpe's countenance while she was staying at the How. Loud will be their self-congra-

tulations and crowings by-and-bye when they hear that this chosen of their brother's was a married woman all the while, and that poor Wilford has been deluded by a designing adventuress. They are not present at this examination. They would not degrade themselves by being interested in this business. It is all very well for the town to be in a fever of curiosity. The county sits aloof amidst its gardens and stables, and poor schools, and vested interests, and can afford to let the topic of the day go by.

After Jenny's examination the coroner adjourns the inquiry, with a view to obtaining additional evidence. But before this adjournment the coroner and Mr. Levison talk confidentially together for some minutes, and it is clear to every one present that the additional evidence will be given by witnesses suggested by Mr. Levison,—witnesses for the defence.

The suspended inquiry closes somewhat abruptly as it seems to the audience, and there is a sense of disappointment at this unfinished condition of things.

Alexis leaves the court full of anxiety, yet more

hopeful than he had been before the inquest. He has seen that curious change in Joel Pilgrim's countenance when pressed by Mr. Levison's questions, and he is convinced that Joel Pilgrim is in some manner concerned in the murder.

He accompanies Sibyl back to the jail, and then returns to the hotel to meet his legal adviser, eager to know what Mr. Levison has to say of the day's work.

'Well,' he asks as soon as they are closeted together, 'what do you think of Joel Pilgrim?'

'I think he did the trick,' replies Mr. Levison after one of his long pauses, which are aggravating to a man as anxious as Alexis, 'and I think he'll bolt.'

'Bolt?'

'Yes. Try to get out of the country. My questions hit him hard. He sees the game is up. The case is simple enough. The old man wanted to wring money out of him, a lump of money, and he was under the old man's thumb in some way. The old man could wind up his business—had a bill of sale or partnership deed that gave him unlimited

power, and threatened to crush Pilgrim unless the money was forthcoming. And not being able to get the money, Mr. Pilgrim took the easiest way out of the difficulty by giving his partner a dose of prussic acid.'

'He must have known that detection was inevitable.'

'I'm not so sure of that. There's a great deal of ignorance in this enlightened age of ours. This man has been brought up in the East, where crime of this kind is commoner and easier than it is here. He may not be very well posted in English law or English customs. He may have thought that in a sleepy little town like this Redcastle no inquiry would have been made as to the cause of an old man's death. He was ailing and he died, and there an end; or he may have thought that the death would have been put down to suicide; or, supposing him to be a very bad lot, he may have intended from the outset to lay the crime at your wife's door. He knew of her possession of that prussic acid.'

'How do you know that?'

'From her own lips, when I talked this matter

over with her half an hour before the inquest. She had shown him the bottle of poison, and threatened to kill herself if he molested her with such attentions as he might have thought he had a right to pay to his affianced wife. She let him know that she had the poison in her possession, and then in the hurry of her flight she forgot the existence of the bottle, and left it, she does not remember where. It was found in her work-basket, where no doubt he put it when he had used its contents.'

'Might not just the same thing have been done by Podmore?'

'How was Podmore to know that your wife had that bottle in her possession? or granted that he did know it, I don't see his motive.'

'Servants have murdered their masters for the sake of plunder, or to come into the possession of a legacy.'

'True, but I don't think Podmore is the man. I have had the two men under my eye, and have taken my measure of both.'

'What are we to do if Pilgrim makes a bolt?'

'Stop him. I've taken measures for that already.

I telegraphed to Scotland Yard for a man I can depend upon. He came down by the first train this morning, and Mr. Pilgrim is under that man's surveillance. He'll play with him as a clever angler plays with his fish, and if it's to be done, he'll land him. But we want the bolt to be decided, we want Pilgrim to throw up the sponge. An attempt to get away may help us to fix him with the fact, for you see the case is a very difficult one. We have to get that prussic acid bottle, known to be in your wife's possession, transferred to the hands of Pilgrim. It's not enough for us to show that there was sufficient motive for his putting the old man out of the way, we must show that he actually did the deed.'

'I don't see how it is to be done,' says Alexis despondingly.

'No more do I, just at present.'

'Do you think the jury were favourably impressed as regards my wife by to-day's examination?'

'Well, yes; I should say rather favourably than otherwise. Your wife is very handsome, you see. and beauty has a great influence upon juries. Then that little girl's evidence, though it was awkward as

to the possession of the poison, was good in some points. Children are capital witnesses if you work them carefully. They always excite sympathy. The little girl suggested a motive for Mrs. Secretan's securing the poison—suicide—persecuted, unprotected, and so on. That idea fits in with her flight from Redcastle. Yes, I think on the whole the little girl's evidence was good.'

It is seven o'clock by this time, and Mr. Levison is ready for his dinner, a substantial fact in the day which he is not inclined to ignore, even though a client's life and fair name tremble in the balance. The two gentlemen dine together, Alexis too anxious to eat, a condition of things which Mr. Levison severely reproves.

'If you want to see your wife safely through this business you must begin by taking care of yourself, Mr. Secretan,' says the lawyer, helping himself to a second supply of fish. 'This salmon is the finest I have ever eaten in this part of England. Try a little bit of the back.'

But salmon cannot tempt Alexis, who is full of anxieties this evening.

The post has just brought a letter from Dick, enclosing another from Linda Challice, and telling him that the little boy has arrived at the Grange.

'He's a dear little fellow,' writes Dick, 'but he frets a good deal about Miss Challice, and it's as much as the maid-servant and I can do to comfort him. We've found a pony for him, and we are teaching him to ride up and down the meadow, which we find very consoling. He laughs and enjoys himself very much during the ride, but when it is all over he still cries for mammie. I am afraid that in the process of consolation we have given him rather more strawberries and other fruit than may be quite advisable. I dare say when you come back he will speedily reconcile himself to his new home. He is to go and see grandpapa Benfield on Sunday afternoon. Miss Challice has gone to the south of France on a sketching tour. I dare say she has told you all about it in her letter.'

This is rather startling news to receive at such a time. His boy at home, Linda gone. He hastens to read her letter.

'DEAR MR. SECRETAN,

'A little quiet reflection has convinced me that you, and you alone, have a right to the custody of my darling Trot. Providence brought him to our home. Providence brought you there to claim your own. What can I wish for him better than a happy home and his father's love? Parting with him is a wrench that must almost break my heart, but the pain would be just the same let the parting come when it might. Knowing this, I have made up my mind to give him up at once, and send him to you this day.

'In order that I may not feel the loss of my darling quite so keenly as I must feel it if I stayed in the home that he has brightened, I have determined to go abroad for a short time. I am going to Cannes, to an old lady, an aunt of my father's, who keeps a boarding-house there. I shall be enabled to practise my favourite art of landscape painting among strange scenes, and the change will be altogether an advantage to me. Of course you will understand that I shall not stay too long away from my dear old grandfather.

'Good-bye, dear Mr. Secretan; may my darling Trot be as happy as I wish him, and a source of unfailing happiness to you. I shall expect to see him grown quite a big boy when I come back to Dorley.

'Very sincerely yours,

'LINDA CHALLICE.'

Alexis folds up the letter with a sigh. So ends his brief romance of Dorley Mill. That Linda has been dearer to him than she should have been he knows but too well. That her heart has been touched by some feeling warmer than pity for a helpless invalid he more than half suspects; but he has never harboured one dishonourable feeling, he has never cherished one guilty wish, and he feels that in thus leaving Dorley for a little while Linda has shown herself as wise as she is good. Pity for his wife's most pitiable condition has strangled that unpermitted love in its birth. He can think of Linda now with a pathetic tenderness hardly akin to pain, as of one he has loved and lost long ago.

He answers Dick's letter before he leaves the

hotel, and gives him a string of directions about Trot. The things that are to be done, and the things that are to be left undone. No mother writing about her firstborn could be more careful. He posts this letter himself on his way to the jail.

He spends a quiet hour with Sibyl, but says not a word about his boy. He cannot bring himself to talk of Trot within those walls. It will be time enough when Sibyl is free from this horrible suspicion, and he can take her to Cheswold Grange.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PODMORES THINK OF EMIGRATION.

It is nine o'clock when Alexis leaves the prison, the latest hour to which he can, by any stretch of authority, be allowed to remain. It is a 'moonless night, with a drizzling rain, and the road is wet and muddy.

In going back to the 'Coach and Horses' he has to pass Lancaster Lodge, and here something arrests his attention. It is a cab loaded with boxes standing before the lodge gate. He sees this vehicle from a little way off, and it has driven through the Bar before he reaches the lodge door.

He rings the bell sharply.

'Who is that just gone away in a cab?' he asks.

'Mr. Podmore, sir, the butler,' answers the woman at the lodge.

'Do you know where he is going?

'To the railway station, sir.'

'Yes, of course. But where afterwards?'

'I don't know for certain, sir, but I think I heard Mrs. Podmore—she came to pack her husband's things—make mention of Liverpool. I believe it's his 'ome, sir.'

'But his wife and children lived in this town, didn't they? What do you mean by Liverpool being his home?'

'Yes, sir, they lived here, Podmore being in service here, but they was only lodgers. I believe Liverpool is his 'ome when he is at 'ome.'

'When does the train go?'

'At half-past nine, sir.'

'And where can I get a cab?'

'None nearer than the "Coach and Horses."'

'Thanks.'

Alexis looks at his watch. There is just time for him to walk the distance at his fastest, and he would rather trust his own legs than wait for a fly to be got ready at the 'Coach and Horses,' always a slow business. He is at the station just as the bell rings. The platform is clear, no sign of Podmore or

Podmore's family. Alexis runs along by the side of the carriages, catches a glimpse of the Podmore household, almost snowed up in bandboxes and bundles, in a second-class compartment, and then jumps into a carriage himself, calling to a porter to get his ticket. There is no time to get a ticket, and Alexis has to defer that operation till the next station. He is hardly in the carriage when the train starts. At Krampston he sees the Podmore troop struggling on the platform, a slatternly woman in a trailing shawl with a frowsy bonnet hanging to the back of her head, two bare-legged children hanging to the long shawl, Podmore, hurried and excited, trying to do two things at once,—namely, to look after his luggage, and to inquire what train he is to take for Liverpool.

'Ten fifteen,' gasps a guard, without looking at the enquirer, 'second platform on the right, change at Wandlethorpe, change at Spilbury.'

Alexis hears this, and follows the Podmore party at a respectful distance. He waits to see Podmore take tickets for Liverpool, sees him and his belongings safely shipped in another second-class

compartment, both children crying, and Mrs. Podmore frantic about a missing bandbox, and then he hurries to the telegraph office and sends the following message to Mr. Levison at the 'Coach and Horses,' Redcastle :—

'Podmore is off to Liverpool with family. This looks like a bolt. I am after him. Telegraph your instructions to the Washington Hotel.'

This done, Mr. Secretan takes a second-class ticket for Liverpool, and gets into the compartment adjoining that occupied by the Podmores, whence come sounds of infantine wailing and wifely remonstrance, and the husky tones of Podmore as if in pacification of these avenging spirits.

Wandlethorpe Junction at midnight is about as dismal a place as a student of the hideous need care to behold. It is on the bank of an inky canal, and coal barges and railway trucks seem to be mixed up in hopeless entanglement. Huge cranes stand up in iron ugliness against night's purple sky. Sidings run off at impossible angles, and unknown lines dip under bridges as if they would take the traveller into the bowels of the earth. Lights are sparsely

sprinkled on the gloom, and what lamps there are have a lurid glare, suggestive of the under world.

Solitary engines block the anxious traveller's way, and snort defiance at him from their sonorous throats, as he tries to cross the labyrinth of iron rails. The soil is coal-dust, and the atmosphere smoke. In the horrible deeps of that infernal world which Dante saw in his midway of life, this last and lowest horror of a railway junction in the coal districts was wanting.

Here, on a dark platform, Alexis is able to keep pretty close to the Podmore family, who are too much occupied with their own affairs to perceive that they are watched. Podmore consoles himself with a tumbler of hot gin and water at the refreshment counter, and gives the same balm to his wife; while the children, with solemn sleepy faces, resolutely gnaw their way through buns of the most indigestible order.

There is half an hour to wait at Wandlethorpe, and then a journey of an hour in the slowest of trains, through a coaly district, on the border of a canal, brings them to Spilbury, where they arrive in

a chilly hour on the edge of night, and where they have again to wait for another train to take them on to Liverpool. It is gray morning when they arrive at that busy port, having wasted more time at junctions than the actual journey has occupied, and having spent more time altogether in the transit than would have been required for a journey from Liverpool to London.

The Podmore family have a weary look as they select their belongings from the heterogeneous contents of the luggage van. The elder child reposes on his father's shoulder, the head of the younger infant hangs helplessly across the mother's arm.

'When does the *Horonoker* sail?' asks Podmore of a porter.

''Merican steamer. Inquire at the office.'

'I hope we're in time,' says Mrs. Podmore to her lord. 'If we are to go, the sooner we sail the better. We shan't do no good dragging about here, spending money in a strange place.'

'*Oronoko*,' says a man of seafaring aspect, who has just possessed himself of a huge green chest, '*Oronoko* for New York. You'd best look sharp if

you're going in her, mate; she sails at ten o'clock this morning.'

'Ten o'clock?' echoes Podmore, 'then there's time enough to get a bit of breakfast, anyhow.'

'And I'm that faint I'm ready to drop,' adds his wife, plaintively. 'Such dragging about as we've gone through, I never did. I feel as if I'd been travellin' for a week at a stretch—and as dizzy in my poor head——'

'Hold your jaw!' says Podmore, sternly; 'there never was such a woman to whine. You're wuss than the childring.'

Podmore arranges with a porter for the conveyance of his boxes, inquires for a decent coffee-house at which he may breakfast, and then leaves the station, his wife straggling after him, clutching a child with one arm and a bandbox with the other, and trailing her gown through the Liverpudlian mud, which is a compound *sui generis*, and a little worse than anything to be found at the east end of London.

Alexis follows the family party to a side street near the station, and into a coffee-house, in whose

dusky window three empty breakfast-cups, a stale muffin, two yellow-looking eggs, and a plate of watercress are suggestive of the temperate refreshment to be obtained within.

Mr. Podmore is just seating himself at a table in a corner, when Alexis taps him on the shoulder.

'I think you'd better have a private room, Mr. Podmore,' he says, 'for I want a little chat with you while you are eating your breakfast.'

Podmore stares with a bewildered air.

'Did you ring, sir?' he asks, and then recalling his scattered senses, 'I beg your pardon, sir, I haven't the honour of your acquaintance.'

'Oh yes, you have, Mr. Podmore, and you'll know more of me before we've done with each other. Waiter, can we have a private room?' asks Alexis, appealing to a sleepy youth in a white apron, who is making a good deal of unnecessary clatter with some cups and saucers in the endeavour to keep himself awake.

'Yes, sir, convenient room upstairs, families and private parties. This way, sir.'

'Now then, Mr. Podmore,' says Alexis.

'But really!' remonstrates Podmore.

Alexis half pushes him up the stairs, following close upon his heels. The wife follows, dragging her children after her. When they are all safe inside the room, Alexis turns to the waiter and whispers,—

'Go and fetch the cleverest police officer in Liverpool, and let him wait outside this door till I want him. I'll take care of you if you look sharp about it.'

'I'm fly,' answers the youth, brightening at the prospect of excitement and remuneration. 'Case of 'bezzlement, I suppose, sir? I'll get you the right kind of man in a quarter of an hour, if you can keep your party quiet till then.'

'Ham and eggs and coffee for four,' says Alexis, aloud, as he enters the private room—a musty den redolent of the meals that have been consumed within the last month. The atmosphere without not being much purer than the atmosphere within, opening the window to admit fresh air is but a choice of evils.

'Now, sir,' says Podmore, plucking up his spirit, and assuming a defiant air, 'may I ask by what

authority you take me and my family in hand, and order us up to this here room ——'

'For which we shall have to pay hextra,' interjects Mrs. Podmore, shrill with indignation.

'And ordering of our breakfastes.'

''Am and eggs is no choice of mine,' protests Mrs. Podmore. 'If they're in, I would rather have a Yarmouth bloater.'

'Who are you, sir, may I ask, to take all this upon yourself?' inquires Podmore, finally.

'I'll tell you, Mr. Podmore. I am the husband of a lady you know something about; a lady you have known as Miss Sibyl Faunthorpe. That lady has been accused most unjustly of being concerned in the murder of her uncle, and what I am here to do is to find the murderer.'

'You won't find him here,' shrieks Mrs. Podmore; at which maternal outburst the two children set up their loudest wail, the youngest crying his hardest with all his fingers in his mouth, and his innocent nose streaming sympathetically.

'I don't know anything about the murderer,' says Podmore, doggedly.

'Oh yes, you do,' replies Alexis, resolutely. 'You know so much that you are either a principal or an accomplice. That is why you have left Redcastle, stealthily, under cover of night, although bound to appear as a witness at the adjourned inquest. That is why you are on your way to America. And let me tell you, Mr. Podmore, that an accessory before the fact is a principal; and that if you knew that this deed was to be done, and stood by while it was done——'

'I didn't. I didn't know it. I was as innocent as that baby there.'

'Then why have you tried to get away? Come, Mr. Podmore, if your share in this work is not that of a principal, if you can clear yourself from actual participation in the crime, or consent to it, the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of it. Help me to prove my wife's innocence, and I'll stand your friend through thick and thin.'

'I may have better friends than you,' grumbles Podmore, with a dogged air,—'friends as willing to help me, and better able to do it.'

'Yes,' cries Alexis at a venture, 'such a friend as

Mr. Pilgrim, who gave you the money to go to New York, who wants to get you out of the way, who poisoned Stephen Trenchard with your knowledge and consent.'

The bow drawn at a venture has sent its shaft home. Alexis can see that in the butler's face. Mrs. Podmore sits by open-eyed, open-mouthed, horror depicted in her countenance. Whatever the butler's secret may be, it is evident that his wife has not shared it.

'Not with my knowledge, nor yet with my consent,' cries Podmore, affrightedly.

'But he did it, and you knew that he did it, —after the fact, perhaps, in which case you'd better turn Queen's evidence. Come, Mr. Podmore, your only chance lies in candour. This attempt to get away from the country is in itself enough to condemn you. You had access to your master all through the night. You gave him his medicine. Who so likely as you to have given the fatal dose? Come, I have a police officer waiting outside this door with a warrant for your arrest.'

'Run and look outside, Liz; this here's only

bluster,' says Podmore ; but before his wife can reach the door Alexis has turned the key and put it into his pocket.

'Neither you nor your wife leave this room till you've told me all you know about Stephen Trenchard's death.'

'Podmore,' cries the wife, distractedly, 'what have you been and done? What disgrace and trouble have you gone and brought on your innocent wife and children? This is all along of drink, Podmore. I always said you'd bring us to the workhouse, but I didn't suppose you'd bring yourself to the scaffold.'

'Hold your noise, you lunatical idiot!' roars Podmore. 'I've done nothing to bring me to harm, but I may know somethink about them that have.'

'Remember that to help or comfort a murderer, or to conceal his crime, is to become an accessory after the fact, Mr. Podmore,' says Alexis.

'Tell what you know, Podmore, and clear yourself,' cries the wife, clasping her hands. 'Clear yourself, and clear your innocent wife and children. I never did like the looks of this sudden scuffling

of us off to New York. It's all very well to emigrant, but I like to emigrant at my leisure. Not a thing fit to put on me or the children is there in them boxes, and not so much as a bottle of Daffy for baby. A nice thing to have this blessed innocent in convulsions with his teeth on board ship, and me that seasick I couldn't do nothink for him.'

'Hold your tongue, Liza,' exclaims the ex-butler testily. 'Come now,' he says, turning to Alexis, 'if I tell what I've got to tell am I to be kept clear of the law?'

'Yes, if it's in my power, or in the power of Levison and Levison to clear you.'

'And what am I to get for standing by you, and helping you to clear your wife—Miss Sibyl Faunthorpe that was.'

'Everything.'

'That ain't definite enough for me. I want five hundred pounds to set me up in the public line. Hang New York! I ain't going to be pitched and tossed across the Atlantic if I can get myself comfortably provided for at home. Give me a

written undertaking to pay me five hundred pounds if I get your wife clear off. Take me round to a lawyer's office, and do it all in legal form, *scundem hartem*, as a master of mine used to say, and I'll go back to Redcastle with you and bear the brunt of having kept something back as I ought to have told. I expect I shall get a twelvemonth for it, but I shan't so much mind that if I've got a snug bit of capital to fall back upon.'

'Podmore!' shrieks the wife.

'You shan't go to prison if Levison and Levison can get you off scot-free,' says Alexis. 'And now we'd better get back to Redcastle as fast as we can, and the agreement can be drawn up there by Mr. Levison.'

'Oh, come now, when you've got me back you won't care about the agreement. I'm not such a fool as to walk into a trap of that sort.'

'If you don't come of your own free will, you'll have to come in custody,' replies Alexis, firmly. 'It wasn't an empty threat of mine about the police officer. He's outside.'

He has heard a firm foot on the stair. He

turns the key, opens the door a little way, and looks out. Yes, there stands the officer, steady as a rock.

'The gentleman outside is ready to take you into custody, Podmore,' says Alexis, 'unless you accept my offer and come back quietly with me. As a proof of good faith, I am prepared to hand you fifty pounds, on account of the five hundred.'

He produces his purse and takes out a bank note for fifty pounds. He had written to his bankers for a supply of ready cash on the day of his arrival at Redcastle, knowing that the sinews of war would be needed at this juncture.

The sight of the crisp new note, and of the officer waiting outside, has a wonderful effect upon Podmore. He looks at his wife dubiously, contemplates his children, whose tears have been dried by their mother's judicious administration of peppermint rock, and who are now engaged in looking out of the window, and printing impressions of their sticky paws upon the dingy glass.

'I don't want to go to New York, no more don't she,' he says, with a jerk of his head towards his

wife; 'but we've sent all our traps on board, and it 'll be very awkward——'

'All awkwardness can be got over by the expenditure of a pound or two. Here are five sovereigns for Mrs. Podmore. She can see to the recovery of the luggage, and bring it back to Redcastle by a later train. We had better catch the next that starts.'

The golden coin has a pacifying effect upon Mrs. Podmore's nerves. She takes the sovereigns up one by one, and turns them over, rings them on the table, and finally engulfs them in a greasy-looking leather purse.

Podmore is thoughtful, but consentient. Alexis says a few words to the officer, and that functionary accompanies Mr. Secretan and his charge to the railway station, sees them comfortably into their carriage, and there leaves them, satisfied with the modest honorarium which Alexis slips into his palm at the last moment.

The train once started, Alexis feels quite capable of dealing with Mr. Podmore single-handed.

CHAPTER XVII.

COMMITTED FOR TRIAL.

THE adjourned inquiry is again resumed before the coroner, two days after the return of Alexis from Liverpool, with his companion the butler, whom he has contrived to keep snugly hidden under Robert Faunthorpe's roof, where Podmore, his wife and children, have been boarded and lodged, and kept in custody by the faithful Hester, who watches her charges as a cat watches a mouse.

'Remember you are not one of you to put so much as your noses out of doors till I come for you, says Alexis, impressively; 'not a creature in Redcastle is to know of your return till the right moment!'

'As long as I have my meals regular I'm satisfied,' replies Podmore, 'I never was a prowler about the streets.'

So the Podmore family occupy the kitchen at

Dr. Faunthorpe's, and no one outside the doctor's house knows anything about these extra inmates.

Alexis and Mr. Levison have crossed each other on the railroad, and that gentleman has returned from a bootless journey to the 'Washington,' considerably out of temper. He has reconciled himself, however, to this wasted expedition in finding what his client has done.

Joel Pilgrim is still at the 'Coach and Horses' where he lives well, and seems to enjoy life. He plays billiards and makes himself eminently agreeable to the youth of Redcastle, Fred Stormont included; but he complains loudly of his detention in the town, on account of this sad business of his old friend's mysterious death, while his own affairs need his presence in Calcutta.

'This dawdling old coroner may drag the inquiry out for the next month,' he says, 'and at last arrive at the conclusion that my poor friend was poisoned by some person or persons unknown. I don't see that there's evidence enough to bring the crime home to that poor girl, and it seems a hard thing that a young and lovely woman should be placed in such a position.'

Frederick sighs, and shakes his head, and shrugs his shoulders.

'It is hard,' he says, 'and I've positively worshipped that girl, you know—devoted myself to her quite awfully. And now to find that there was a husband in the background all the while. Shows a want of candour, you know.'

'Proves an artful disposition certainly,' replies Mr. Pilgrim, 'but if every artful young woman took to disposing of people with prussic acid there'd be an alarming decrease in the population.'

'True,' says Fred. 'Well, I'm sure I hope she didn't do it, poor thing. But I'm sorry to say the opinion of the town is against her.'

He says this with an air which implies that to be condemned by public opinion in Redcastle is to have received sentence from a supreme tribunal, and to be found guilty at a bar from which there is no court of appeal.

'I really feel for her, you know,' says Fred, as he prostrates himself upon the green cloth to aim at a distant ball, 'but the town thinks badly of the case She had the poison in her possession, you know, and

she ran away, you know. It's difficult to avoid making four out of two such twos.'

'Looks suspicious, certainly,' replies Mr. Pilgrim.

'As far as the running away goes, she might have done that to avoid marrying you, certainly,' says Fred, reflectively.

'That would have been a very childish proceeding,' answers Joel; 'she had only to tell me the truth, and all question of marriage would have been at an end.'

'But women do odd things sometimes, you know. They're apt to get wrong in their heads when they're frightened.'

'I don't think Sibyl is that sort of girl; she must have been a very cool hand to come here to her uncle—the wife of a man whose name he detested, and pass herself off as a single woman, and play her cards to inherit a fortune.'

'True,' says Frederick, despondently, and his opinion of Sibyl is a little worse than it was before Mr. Pilgrim undertook her defence.

It is just possible that Mr. Pilgrim would not remain at Redcastle quite so patiently were it not

for a suspicion on his part that a certain shabby little man in black, who hangs about the public rooms of the hotel, and spends a good deal of his time in the hall and porch, and contrives always to be in the way when Mr. Pilgrim goes out, nay, even happens to have business or pleasure that takes him exactly the same way, has been set as a watch upon somebody's movements, and that any attempt to hasten his intended journey to Calcutta might be attended with unpleasant consequences. Whatever perils may surround Mr. Pilgrim's path will be best overcome by a calm adherence to his present policy, or at least so argues that gentlemen; and he quietly awaits the conclusion of the examination in which his evidence is required.

On this bright summer morning the same crowd is again gathered in the well-known assembly-room —a room famous for town and county balls, for concerts, and fancy fairs, and other local festivities, but affording a scene of more absorbing interest to-day than the most aristocratic of dances or charity bazaars.

Mrs. Stormont is there again, with her constant

ally Mrs. Groshen, wearing the same veils and bonnets, and seated in the same sheltered corner near the reporter's table. There is Mr. Levison sitting near the Coroner, with that Memnon's head of his, stony and inexpressive, but certainly not given to melodious breathings at sunrise or any other time. There sits Sibyl, pale as marble, and calm as a statue, her husband standing behind her chair.

To-day there are fresh witnesses to be examined —so runs the rumour, and there is an eager curiosity about these new witnesses and the evidence they may give.

The first witness called is Bathsheba Skinner, spinster, lately cook and housekeeper in the employment of the deceased.

'What can that woman have to say about the case?' mutters Joel Pilgrim to Colonel Stormont, who is standing next him.

'Not much, I should think, unless she poisoned him in one of her curries,' replies the colonel; 'doocid good curries they were.'

Bathsheba Skinner is sworn, and stands up before the assembly, vinegar-faced, but eminently

respectable, with black kid gloves, a trifle too long in the fingers, on her industrious hands, and a pictorial brooch a little smaller than a cheese-plate clasping her rusty black lace shawl.

'You were in the habit of preparing all nourishment that was taken up to Mr. Trenchard's room;' says the coroner after a few preliminary questions, 'broths, arrowroot, and so on.'

'Yes, sir, I did it all with my own hands. There was many things I might have left to the kitchen maid, but I felt it was my duty to see to it myself. There was not a thing in the way of beef tea, or jelly, or tapioca, or arrowroot, that went up to Mr. Trenchard which was not prepared by my own hands:

'And are you sure that nothing of a poisonous nature entered into any of these things?'

'As sure as I am that I'm alive, sir.'

'Come, you may have used essences to flavour your jelly, or your tapioca. Essential oil of almonds, or at any rate essence of almonds. That is a favourite flavouring with cooks, and a dangerous one. Didn't you use essence of almonds to flavour Mr. Trenchard's jelly?'

'I hadn't a drop in the house, sir. I never have held with such stuff. When I want almond flavouring I use the best Jordans at two shillings a pound, but I know my business better than to use almond flavouring of any kind for an invalid. Invalid cookery can't be too simple.'

'You did not even use bitter almonds, or ratafia, peach kernels, or anything of that kind?'

'No, sir.'

'You slept on the same floor as Podmore, the butler, I believe?'

'Yes, sir, my room was next to his.'

'Did you hear anything remarkable, any unusual stir or movement,—in short, anything at all out of the common course in Podmore's room or on the stairs leading to Podmore's room during the night of your master's death?'

'Well, sir, I did hear something which struck me at the time as curious, and yet it might mean nothing. I mentioned it afterwards to Podmore, and he put me down——."

'You mustn't tell us what you said to Podmore, or how he answered you. That isn't evidence.

We want to know what you heard on the night of the 23rd of June.'

'Well, sir, I am a light sleeper at all times, and perhaps I was extra wakeful on that night on account of the wedding that was fixed for next day. It was to be quite a quiet wedding, and there was no breakfast ordered, but I'd cooked a tongue and a pair of fowls, and made a jelly and a cream or two, and boiled a bit of salmon for a mayonnaise, and got everything in order to put a pretty little luncheon on the table, and the fag and worry of that had over-tired me, so that I got very little sleep. It was broad daylight, and I was just dropping off, when I heard Podmore get up and go down stairs in his creaky slippers. "He's gone down to give master his medicine," says I to my- "I won't try to go to sleep no more till he o again or else he'll be startling me just as g off comfortable again. He won't be minutes." Well, I waited and waited ng gone five minutes as usual, -hour before Podmore came

'Did you look at your watch?' asks a precise juryman.

'Lor, no, sir, but I can guess a half-hour as well as any one. I've got into the way of it over my roasting; a good cook knows the value of time. It was a full half-hour before Podmore came up, and then he came up ever so slowly, holding to the baluster, and his footstep was as heavy as lead. And when he got into his room he flung himself down on his bed, and gave a groan. "What was the matter with you last night?" I asked him at breakfast-time. At first he didn't seem as if he understood what I meant, but when I told him I'd heard him groaning, he said he'd had an attack of spasms, and he'd been down to the pantry to look for some mustard for a poultice. I didn't think much more of it after that, and an hour later the house was upset by my master's death. But I've thought of it since many times.'

'Do you know what time it was when you went down stairs.'

'It was a few minutes

the stable clock strike a little before. And I took particular notice on account of its being just an hour late for Mr. Trenchard's medicine, for four o'clock was the hour at which he ought to have took it.'

'There was nothing else you remarked that night.'

'No sir.'

'I think that will do.'

'I beg your pardon," interposes Mr. Levison, 'I should like to ask the witness one or two questions.—Pray will you be kind enough, Mrs. Skinner, to tell the jury of a conversation which you heard outside Mr. Trenchard's door on the last evening but one before his death?'

'I did certainly overhear a conversation, sir.'

'What can any such conversation, or any eavesdropping whatever, have to do with the question at issue,' cries Joel Pilgrim, livid with anger or fear. The change in his countenance is noticed by every one, just as the less marked change during the last examination was noticed by a few.

'We shall see how far the conversation is relevant, sir,' replies the coroner, 'when Mrs. Skinner has answered Mr. Levison's question.'

'I did hear a conversation, sir, between my master and Mr. Pilgrim,' says Mrs. Skinner, with a vindictive look at Joel, 'but I was not eavesdropping. I've lived too long in the best of families to be an eavesdropper, or to be suspected of being such by any gentleman calling himself a gentleman. What I heard that night I heard promiscuous, and I stayed to hear no more than reached my ears promiscuous as I went past Mr. Trenchard's door.'

Mrs. Skinner goes on to relate the conversation which she had described to Alexis on his visit to Lancaster Lodge.

'Gentlemen,' cries Joel, vehemently, 'this is an abominable fabrication, prompted by some hidden influence. No such conversation took place. My—— Mr. Trenchard held no such threat over me. Mrs. Skinner must have been a long time crossing the landing to hear all this, gentlemen of the jury. I tell you that she could not have heard it in that time,

she did not hear it at any time; but she invented it, or it has been invented for her——'

'Mr. Pilgrim, I really cannot allow this,' says the coroner.

'You will better appreciate Mr. Pilgrim's warmth when you have heard the next witness,' says Mr. Levison.

A faint flush of colour warms Sibyl's marble cheek. She feels as if light were coming swiftly through the gloom. Her husband has told her nothing, except to trust in Providence and in him. She has so trusted, and those quiet monotonous days in Redcastle jail are the most peaceful days she has known since she fled from Dixon Street and poverty more than three years ago.

Joel Pilgrim looks intently to the other end of the room, watching for the appearance of that witness of whom Mr. Levison has spoken. He starts, and the leaden hue of his countenance takes a more death-like shade when some one calls 'Joseph Podmore!'

Podmore advances to the little railed-off space which has been made for the witnesses. He is very

pale, and is evidently nervous; but he is perfectly sober.

'Now, Mr. Podmore,' says Levison, when a few questions, chiefly repetitive, have been asked by the coroner, 'will you be good enough to state what happened within your knowledge on the night of Mr. Trenchard's death?'

The ex-butler rubs his hands nervously, looks round the assembly, shifts his balance from one foot to the other, coughs dubiously, and then begins,—

'Gentlemen of the jury, and your worship, I am about to make a statement which I ought to have made before. It has preyed upon my mind havin' kep' it back; but I am a pore man, with a young fambly dependent upon my exertions in service. I was ackshally on my way to New York, gentlemen of the jury and your honour, and had got as far on my voyage as Liverpool, when the facks in question preyed upon my mind to that degree that I felt I must come back to this town to reveal them. I hope this will plead in my faviour, your worship and gentlemen of the jury, if there is any irregularity in my not having made this revelation sooner.'

'The man is drunk or mad!' cries Joel, savagely.

'The man is sober to-day, Mr. Pilgrim,' says the coroner. 'Go on, Mr. Podmore.'

'The statement I have to make relates to the night of my master's death, the night of June 23rd. I was an hour late, gentlemen, on that night in going downstairs to give my master his medicine. I had slep' extra heavy, and it was five o'clock instead of four when I woke. I went down as usual. The house was very quiet; but I took notice that the door of Mr. Pilgrim's bedroom—the secondary door opening on to the landing—stood ajar. So, thinks I, Mr. Pilgrim is with my master, perhaps he has given the old gentleman his medicine. I wasn't so much surprised as I might have been at Mr. Pilgrim being astir so early, for he always was early. It was one of his Indian ways. Well, gentlemen of the jury, I goes to my master's door, and when I puts my hand against it, the door opens a little way, without any noise; for the locks at Lancaster Lodge are old-fashioned box locks, and the catches give way, so that half your time though a door looks to be shut it's not really fastened. The

door gave way to my hand, and I looked in. Mr. Trenchard was sitting up in bed, and Mr. Pilgrim was opening a bottle of soda water on the dressing-table. I saw him pour some of the soda water into a tumbler, and then I saw him, quick as lightning, pour something out of a bottle in his other hand. As I live, gentlemen of the jury, it didn't strike me at that moment that there was any harm. I thought it was some kind of medicine or drops, like choral-dyne, or choral, or some of those new-fangled opiates, and I didn't feel myself called on to interfere. There was no time for me to turn it over in my mind, you see; there wasn't a moment between Mr. Pilgrim's pouring the stuff into the glass and his handing the glass to my master. Mr. Trenchard drank it off at a draught. It weren't above a third of a bottle of soda water. He sat for an instant bolt upright, his eyes straining out of his head and glassy; then he gave one long gasp, and fell back on his pillow purple in the face, as if you'd clutched him by the throat and strangled him. I rushed into the room, and lifted him up in my arms. I thought at first he was in a fit; but when I stooped

over him I smelt a sharp strong smell like bitter almonds, and then I knew it was prussic acid. "What have you given him?" I asked. But Mr. Pilgrim made no answer. "You've killed him," I said, and then he told me that it was accident. He had taken the wrong bottle. He had taken a bottle of prussic acid which Mr. Trenchard kept in his medicine-chest, among other drugs, instead of choral. He seemed in a dreadful state of mind. I couldn't help feeling for him. Who could tell whether it wasn't accident? and, if it was, anybody might have found theirselves in the same position.'

'Spare us your reflections, if you please,' says the coroner. 'Had your master any medicine-chest in his room?'

'Yes, there was a small box, with about half a dozen bottles in partitions.'

'Do you know one of these bottles to have contained prussic acid in any form whatever?'

'I can't say that I do, your worship. There was hartshorn, and caddleput oil, and tincter of rhubub, and such like.'

'You have named three bottles out of the half-dozen,' says the coroner.

Mr. Levison whispers into his ear.

'Yes, that would be best,' says the coroner, and he beckons one of the men in attendance and despatches him on some errand.

'Did Mr. Pilgrim offer you money to hold your tongue about what you had seen?' asks the coroner.

Podmore fences with this question for a little, but ends by confessing that Joel Pilgrim did offer him money; that he gave him twenty pounds on the spot, and promised to provide for him hereafter. He further admits that Joel had instigated him to emigrate to America, and had given him neither rest nor peace till he had made all arrangements for his departure. Mr. Pilgrim had paid his passage on board the *Oronoko*.

By the time this question is settled the man who has been sent out by the coroner returns, carrying a small mahogany case, with brass plates at the corners, an old-fashioned case divided into six compartments, each containing a small square bottle of very thick glass.

These bottles the coroner takes out one by one, examines them, and exhibits them to the jury. The six bottles contain hartshorn, sal volatile, opium, tincture of rhubarb, cajeput oil, and syrup of squills.

Each bottle is carefully labelled with a label in Stephen Trenchard's handwriting pasted on the glass.

'Gentlemen,' says the coroner, 'I think we have now arrived at a stage in this inquiry when a further adjournment will be necessary. It will be as well to give time for the inquiry which is going on before the magistrate.'

There is a little consultation, and the jury are dismissed.

White to the very lips, Joel Pilgrim turns to Colonel Stormont with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

'Was there ever anything so absurd as the manner of this inquiry?' he asks. 'There is actually a premium offered for perjury! This man, Secretan, has had ample time to bribe any number of false witnesses. What more easy than for him to get up

this story, and pay the housekeeper and butler for perjuring themselves?'

Colonel Stormont makes no reply. He feels rather uncomfortable in Mr. Pilgrim's neighbourhood after the butler's evidence. The story may be a tissue of lies, woven by Sibyl's husband; but, on the other hand, it is as likely to be true—and that dark face of Joel Pilgrim's tells strange tales.

There is a general move towards the door. Mr. Pilgrim is about to pass out with the rest, when a hand is laid upon his shoulder, and Mr. Judbury, the detective officer, takes possession of him.

'What do you mean by this?' asks Joel, indignantly.

'Only that I have a warrant for your apprehension under suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Mr. Trenchard,' replies Judbury, coolly. 'I've had my eye upon you for a good time; but it's always foolish to hurry these things, and if we'd hurried you we shouldn't have had Podmore's attempt to get away to New York, which brought matters to what I call a focus. Come along, sir, I've got a fly outside. You may just as well come quietly.'

And Joel submits, knowing quite enough about English law and English customs to be aware that anything in the way of resistance would be worse than useless. He shrugs his shoulders, and affects to take the matter lightly, though those white lips and haggard eyes of his give the lie to his assumed carelessness.

'If your Redcastle magistrates choose to take me into custody on a fabricated charge, they do it at their own peril,' he says, loud enough for those round him to hear. 'I shall make them pay as heavily for their pig-headed folly as the law will enable me.'

'Step inside, sir,' says Mr. Judbury; 'you shall have plenty of law, free, gratis, for nothing.'

The fly drives off, and Joel makes his entrance for the first time under that mediæval archway whose gates were opened just a week ago to admit Sibyl.

There is a further examination before the magistrates next day. The same witnesses repeat the same evidence. Mr. Levison cross-questions, and is unusually active. Joel Pilgrim sits in the seat of the accused, side by side with Sibyl. He is de-

fended—or rather, the case is watched for him—by a rival of Mr. Levison's, a gentleman equal in renown in the criminal courts. Further details are extorted from Podmore under this cross-firing of interrogation; but Joel Pilgrim's solicitor strives in vain to shake one iota of his testimony. If this be perjury, there never was a more accomplished perjurer, or a false witness that held more firmly to the lesson he had learnt.

When the examination of witnesses is concluded Mr. Levison addresses the magistrates, and urges that his client shall be dismissed without a stain upon her character.

The magistrates confer together, and agree that there is not sufficient evidence to connect Sibyl Secretan with the murder, and that she may therefore be set at liberty.

This being done, Mr. Levison suggests that she shall be placed in the witness-box, and examined as to her possession of the prussic acid.

Pale, and trembling a little, Sibyl takes the necessary oath upon the small black book, and waits to answer the magistrate's questions.

'You have heard your sister's evidence as to your abstraction of the prussic acid from the bottle in your uncle's surgery?'

'Yes.'

'Do you admit the truth of that statement?'

'Yes. I was in great distress of mind at the time, and I thought if there were no other way out of my troubles I might destroy myself. I do not say that I meant to do such a wicked thing. I only considered it as a means of release from my difficulties—open to me at the very last extremity.'

'And you took the prussic acid with that idea?'

'Yes.'

'You had no other design whatever in taking it?'

'None whatever.'

'Did Mr. Pilgrim know that you had this poison in your possession?'

'He did.'

'How did that happen?'

'Am I obliged to answer this question? asks Sibyl.

'Yes, it is positively necessary for you to tell

ns everything relating to your possession of this prussic acid.'

'It had been arranged by my uncle Trenchard that Mr. Pilgrim and I were to be married. My uncle did not know that I was married already. He had a prejudice against my husband's family, and I had been so foolish as to keep my marriage secret from him. Mr. Pilgrim went to York to obtain the licence, and we were to have been married on the Saturday, the day on which I left Lancaster Lodge. I made up my mind to run away at the last rather than to tell Mr. Trenchard about my marriage. It was a cowardly act, I dare say, but I had deceived him so long that I feared his anger on hearing the truth.'

'How does this bear upon Mr. Joel Pilgrim's knowing about the prussic acid?'

'I am coming to that.' It was on the night of his return from York with the marriage licence. He came up to my little sitting-room late that night, between ten and eleven, and told me about the licence. He had been dining, and he seemed in very high spirits.'

'Do you mean that he was intoxicated?'

'Oh no, he was only a little more excited than usual. He talked a good deal about our marriage, and for the first time in his life he tried to kiss me. I showed him the prussic acid bottle, and told him that I would sooner poison myself than let him touch my lips. He was very angry, and he told me that prussic acid was a dangerous thing for a woman to carry about her, and that I was playing with edged tools.'

'Did he take the bottle from you?'

'No.'

'What became of the bottle after that?'

'I really can't tell. My intention was to put it back into my pocket, but I was very much flurried at this time. I may have left it on the table among the books and other things. There were a great many things on the table.'

'When did you miss the bottle?'

'Not till I was in London, when it recurred to my memory. I searched my pocket for it, but it was not to be found.'

'Were you wearing the same dress you had on upon the evening when you showed Mr. Pilgrim the bottle?'

'Yes. It is the dress I am wearing now.'

This is all. The inquiry is again adjourned.

The inquiry before the coroner is concluded next day, the verdict wilful murder against Joel Pilgrim. The inquiry before the magistrates is concluded the day after by Joel Pilgrim's committal for trial, on the capital charge.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'A DARK TALE DARKLY FINISHED.'

SIBYL is free once more. She has been in durance scarcely a fortnight, yet it is a new thing for her to come out into the light of day, and feel that she is at liberty to go where she pleases. It is a wondrous and a strange relief to know that the awful suspicion which has been hanging over her, separating her from all the rest of the world, is removed. But her first anxiety is to escape from Redcastle. The place has become hateful to her. She knows that the eyes of those who once flattered and courted her have been turned upon her in cold unpitying curiosity, that of all her summer friends not one has remained true to her in the hour of adversity, and she is eager to get beyond ken of those cold hard faces, beyond the sound of those false voices, which have spoken her fairly in the day of prosperity, and kept silence when she had need of comfort.

'I have no one but you, Alex,' she says humbly; 'no one but you and dear old uncle Robert. I wonder that you are both so good to me.'

She goes straight from the court to Dr. Faunthorpe's house, and is curiously gentle and affectionate in her demeanour to her uncle and the two girls. Marion plunges into vehement hysterics at sight of her elder sister, and on recovering from that attack embraces Sibyl warmly, and is more demonstrative of sisterly affection than she has been for a long time. She is far more kindly disposed towards Sibyl, penniless, and the mark of the world's scorn, than she ever felt towards the supposed heiress to Stephen Trenchard's wealth. As for Jenny, she goes fairly mad, hugs her sister to desperation, is very proud of her own performance in the witness box, and finally rushes out to the kitchen to ask Hester to make hot cakes for tea. No one who has not eaten Yorkshire cakes, and seen them made and baked in a Yorkshire kitchen, by a brisk and energetic Yorkshire housewife, can have a just idea of the celerity with which this operation can be performed.

But on this particular evening Sibyl is far too languid to be tempted into injuring her digestion by the consumption of hot buttered cakes. She sits in a corner of the old parlour sofa and takes her cup of tea in pensive silence, and the anxious little doctor sees that the events of the last few months have had a destroying influence upon his favourite niece's health and beauty. He creeps close beside her and feels her pulse. It is quick and irregular.

'You want rest, my love,' he says, 'you must stay with us for a few weeks in your old room, and let me doctor you, and Hester nurse you, till you get strong again.'

'I like my old room, uncle Robert, and I love to be with you, but I hate Redcastle. I should never get well here. Let me go with my husband to his new home, if he will have me.'

She looks pleadingly at Alexis, and sees that she has been forgiven.

'My home is yours, Sibyl, and I will take you there as soon as you are free to go. But I think you had better accept your uncle's hospitality for a little

while, as your evidence will be required for Mr. Pilgrim's trial.'

'What?' asks Sibyl, 'is it not all over?'

'No, my love, the trial has to come yet, and the witnesses examined by the coroner and magistrate will have to repeat their evidence?'

'How dreadful!' sighs Sibyl.

'It is an ordeal to be gone through, my love, but when that is over we shall be free to go to Cheswold Grange, and all our troubles will be over, I hope. And before the summer is ended your uncle and your sisters must come and pay us a visit in Hampshire.'

'That will be delightful!' cries Jenny, rapturously; 'Have you a nice garden?'

'A glorious old garden, Jenny, with about a mile of wall fruit. Such plums and peaches!'

'A nursery for English cholera,' says the doctor.

'And there's a pony, Jane,—you'd like that, I think,' observes Alexis.

'Shouldn't I just!'

'But before you come to Cheswold Grange I should like you to cure yourself of one bad habit,

Jane. I won't mention it before company, but if you recall to your mind a certain interview between a gentleman and a young lady I dare say you will understand what I mean.'

Jenny blushes vehemently, remembering that little romance about Mrs. Yokohama Gray.

So all is forgiveness and peace in the shabby old house at the end of the town, and Alexis, touched to the heart by his wife's contrition, and by those sad eyes of hers which have a weary look that tells of suffering borne and hidden, feels that his old love for her is not quite dead, and that after all, faulty though she has been, she is the woman he would choose to sit by his fireside in the old house at Cheswold.

Alexis returns to his hotel that evening, where there is much talk of Joel Pilgrim and his arrest. No one has any doubt of his guilt, and many go so far as to affirm that they have been convinced of it from the first, and have declared their convictions to their friends and acquaintance. These being called upon to bear witness to this fact answer meanly that they don't exactly remember: that such

opinions may have been expressed: but that they fail to recall them. In any case Joel is prejudged in Redcastle, and there is a wonderful reaction about Sibyl, who is exalted into a heroine and martyr, as if to have been wrongfully suspected was equivalent to having performed some great and noble action. Mrs. Stormont calls for the first time in her life at the shabby old house at the lower end of the town, and leaves quite a packet of cards for Dr. Faunthorpe and his nieces, and one of the Colonel's cards for the special benefit of Mr. Secretan; for it has become known to Redcastle that Alexis has a pretty little estate in Hampshire and is by no means that fortuneless adventurer he was supposed to be on his first appearance upon the Redcastle stage.

Everybody is eager for the trial, and there is a great deal of speculation as to the exact date at which it will 'come on,' and who will be the Crown lawyer, and who will defend the accused, Before midnight there runs a rumour that Pilgrim has secured the famous Vallentyne for his defender, and there is an idea that he will get off.

'A clever counsel could shake the butler's

evidence, make the jury disbelieve him altogether perhaps; and without his evidence how are they to bring the crime home to Pilgrim?' ask the knowing ones.

Before noon next day it is known that Joel Pilgrim has accepted his earthly defeat, and has gone forth to meet the fiat of a more terrible Judge than that sage and learned lawyer who would have sat in judgment upon him at the forthcoming assizes. Early on the morning following his arrest he has found means to elude the vigilance of his warder, and has opened a vein with a small penknife, which he has contrived to keep hidden in the silken lining of his coat-sleeve. Lying quietly on his prison bed, the warder slumbering on a pallet by his side, he has given himself his death-wound, and let life ebb silently without a groan.

He has occupied the earlier part of the night in writing, and this is the result, which is speedily devoured by the ravening maws of a thousand different newspapers and given to the world. It figures on the hoardings before newsvenders' shops in fat black capitals:—

'Startling Revelation—The Redcastle Murder—Dying Confession of Joel Pilgrim!'

'If it is any satisfaction to the world at large, which never gave me anything that I did not obtain by an appeal to its self-interest, to know the history of a man whose hours are now numbered, I give it in a few words.

'I am the son of Stephen Trenchard, the only offspring of his marriage with a Hindoo dancing girl, and that marriage about as legal an union as a European of some social standing cares to contract with a low caste Indian. My mother had, I believe, little except her beauty to recommend her to an Englishman's notice; but she was inoffensive, and she died young,—two merits which secured her husband's respect.

'My father never acknowledged this marriage, or me as his son. But he took me into his office at an early age, and finding that I was tolerably shrewd, and of his own way of thinking in commercial matters, had me well educated between the age of eighteen and twenty-four, and at twenty-five took me for his partner.

'The fortunes of our house varied as years went on. We made money very fast, but we had the misfortune sometimes to lose it even faster. Our gains generally tempted us to make losses, and each successful transaction brought an unlucky follower at its heels. Thus if we made a hundred per cent by indigo one year, we perhaps lost a hundred and fifty per cent. by indigo the next, being lured into some reckless speculation, time bargains, and the rest of it. Our opium trade brought us most money, and we trafficked in other goods which proved profitable merchandise, but somewhat damaged the character of our house. In other words, rather than let our vessels ground upon their beef-bones for want of a remunerative cargo, we occasionally went in quietly for the slave trade, supplied our Demerara friends with Coolies, and shipped a good deal of live stock of this kind at different ports. To put it briefly we were general dealers on a large scale.

'The business had never been weaker than in that year when my father suddenly took it into his head that it was time for him to retire, and

drew ten thousand pounds out of the house, some thousands beyond our real capital. It left me with a crippled business, and I felt that my father had done me a great wrong by this selfish retirement. For the first year after his return to England fortune favoured me, and the prospects of the house brightened. I made one or two lucky hits and began to pluck up spirit. But this state of things did not last long. I lost a shipload of coolies under somewhat painful circumstances. The ship and supposed cargo, not the coolies, were heavily insured. The underwriters refused to pay, and there was some talk of scuttling. This scandal, although strangled in the birth, did me harm. A commercial man's reputation is as delicate a blossom as a hothouse flower, any chill wind nips it. When I found things going to the bad in Calcutta, I came home, thinking that my father might help me out of my difficulties, or at least enable me to float my unwieldy ship a little while longer by the use of a few of those thousands he had squeezed out of the business. This he peremptorily refused, and had the injustice to

accuse me of bad trading. We had bitter words on the subject on many occasions; and not content with refusing to help me, he urged me to raise money to pay off the remaining ten thousand pounds due to him by a deed of dissolution which he had made me sign before he left Calcutta, he resigning his share of the business in consideration of receiving twenty thousand pounds, ten thousand at the time of the execution of the deed, ten thousand within three years from that date.

'The time had expired, and he urged me repeatedly to raise the money. When he found that I had set my heart upon marrying his niece—whom I naturally supposed to be a single woman, he made my payment of this ten thousand pounds a condition of my marriage. No money, no wife, he said—thus using my tenderest feelings as a lever to wrench money out of me. I think this plan of proceeding hardly comes under the head of fatherly affection.

'Of the tragedy which terminated the story of my father's existence I have nothing to say. Time may perhaps make that mystery clear. I shall not

gratify idle curiosity by any revelation, supposing it to be in my power to reveal anything touching this question, which I leave as a subject for speculation to that new school which devotes its labours to the study of psychological mysteries.'

This is all—disappointing perhaps to the world in general, but giving Redcastle a new subject for conversation.

'Imagine that horrid Indian being Mr. Trenchard's son after all!' exclaims Mrs. Stormont, when she and her dear Mrs. Groshen meet to discuss the latest scandal over their harlequin teacups. 'I always thought there was a likeness.'

'I can't say that I saw any resemblance. Such a difference in complexion, you know. But what a horribly disreputable set these Trenchards seem to have been!' says Mrs. Groshen, in a wholesale way, as if there had been a regiment of them.

'Yes, selling slaves, and opium, and scuttling ships, and doing everything horrid.'

'And to think that we should have asked them to dinner!' cries the banker's wife, remembering

how often she has squandered her housekeeping money upon hothouse fruit and flowers to decorate the board at which Stephen Trenchard was to be the chief guest.

'How lucky that dreadful Pilgrim never accepted our invitations!' exclaims Mrs. Stormont. 'I have no doubt he was afraid to show himself in society. He eats with chopsticks, I dare say.'

'I rather think that chopsticks are Chinese, my dear,' replies Mrs. Groshen, whose remembrance of the Child's Guide to Useful Knowledge has not been weakened by the lapse of so many years as have gone by since her elder friend left a fashionable boarding school, carefully finished in all those elegant accomplishments which take six years to learn and can be comfortably forgotten in three.

Thus runs town talk in quiet Redcastle. There will be no trial, and among the general public interest in Stephen Trenchard's murder languishes, and soon dies for want of nutriment.

EPILOGUE.

All through the rest of the summer weather, till the leaves change from green to red and yellow, and the sturdy oaks, slow to bud and last to succumb to Time the destroyer, have put on their russet livery, Sibyl lies in the chief bedchamber at Cheswold Grange sick nigh unto death. She has broken down utterly now that the struggle is over, now that all storms are ended and her frail bark safe in harbour. There is no violent illness, no raging fever of brain or body, only an extreme prostration, which for a long time baffles the skill of an intelligent physician and a careful family doctor.

She lies in the bright pretty bedroom, with its old panelled walls painted pale pink and cream colour, its needlework pictures, its quaint furniture, and many relics of a departed generation. There is a wide window opposite her bed that extends from ceiling to floor, and through this she listlessly contemplates the fair landscape, the smil-

ing garden, the autumnal glory of the park. She suffers little pain, except such weariness as attends extreme prostration. She is at peace, and even declares herself happy.

'I have lived long enough, Alex,' she says one day when her strength has ebbed to the lowest point compatible with life, and the doctors have begun to despair of the efficacy of the pharmacopeia in this particular case. Alexis, deeply moved, sits by her bed, and holds her feeble hand in the dim autumn twilight. 'I am content for my earthly race to finish here. You have forgiven me. That is enough.'

'But have you no thought of me, Sibyl? Is it kind to talk like that?'

'Dear Alex, you have been more than good to me, but I have not forgotten what you said that evening of our meeting in the old room at Mrs. Bonny's. "Love is dead," you told me.'

'That was said under the influence of anger, Sibyl. I thought it was true, but sorrow soon fastened the old knot again. Sorrow and peril reunited us, Sibyl.'

'And do you really love me? I know that you have forgiven me, but are you sure you love me still?'

'Very sure,—as much and as truly as I ever loved you in old Kensington Gardens, under the elms, when I told the Hazleton children fairy tales, and my life and yours seemed as sweet a fairy tale as any of those old nursery stories, and as sure of a blissful ending.'

'Oh, Alex, is that the truth?'

'As I live, darling.'

'Then I think I shall make an effort and get well,' replies Sibyl, with a sigh of utter contentment. 'I have been willing to glide gently out of life, believing that, however good you were to me, I could never hope to win more than your forgiveness; but now I shall try very hard to get well.'

She keeps her word. Whether her illness has reached its natural turning-point—the tide of life flowing back to its source,—or whether the ardent desire of the patient to live helps the work of recovery, the medical men can not say. But from this time there is a change. Slowly but surely health

and youth come back to the pale wan face. The lovely eyes lose their glassy lustre, and grow bright with happy thoughts; faint gleams of carnation flit like the shadow of a sunset cloud over the marble pallor, then linger, and warm the pallid cheek into life and beauty.

'Your love has won me back from the grave, Alex,' whispers Sibyl, four or five weeks after that talk in the twilight, when the family doctor—that very Mr. Skalpel who attended Alexis after his accident—has declared that Mrs. Secretan's recovery is absolutely marvellous.

When Sibyl is out of danger, Richard Plowden, who has been a faithful friend and comforter throughout this time of trouble, and has acted as Trot's chief nurse and playmate into the bargain, departs somewhat abruptly upon a journey, the business and destination whereof he does not reveal to his dear friend Alexis.

'It's a little bit of a trip I've been meditating for a longish time,' he says; 'I'll tell you all about it when I come back. I think I shall start to-morrow.'

'You'll write to us while you're away, of course Dick?'

'Well, yes, if I can manage it,' replies Mr. Plowden, with rather a sheepish air; 'but you mustn't be alarmed if you don't hear from me. I shall be moving about from place to place, you see, and I may be out of the way of post-offices—off the beaten track, you know.'

'Good gracious!' exclaims Alexis, 'are you going to the centre of Africa? Is my modest geographer coming out as a second Sir Samuel Baker?'

Alexis is too much occupied with his wife's recovery just now to be very curious about his friend. He thinks Dick's movements are somewhat eccentric, and that is all.

'Perhaps he objects to my being here,' says Sibyl, who has learned to think very humbly of herself of late.

'Object to you, Sibyl! Why you must know that he is absolutely devoted to you, and has been almost as anxious as I was during your illness. He was prejudiced against you before he saw you, out

of affection for me, poor fellow, thinking that I had been hardly used; but when once you came back to love and duty he was your slave.'

For about a month nothing is heard of Richard Plowden, and Alexis is beginning to feel somewhat uneasy about his friend's fate, when he receives a letter, in Dick's neat hand, posted at Cannes.

'My dear friend,' writes Richard, 'when I left you and Mrs. Secretan so abruptly I was departing upon so daring and so wild an expedition, that I felt too much ashamed of my own audacity to tell you my errand. I came to the south of France to discover whether there was any hope of my ever winning, by long years of patient devotion, the dearest and best, purest, and most unselfish of women. You had told me to hope in the day of my despondency, and I had hoped, although I scorned myself for my foolishness in hoping. At last I told myself that it was worse than foolish to go on hoping and dreaming. I must "put it to the test, and win or lose," as the old song says. So I came here, found my sweetest Linda working industriously at her art, pensive, but not altogether unhappy. She was de-

lighted to see me—not for my own sake, you may be sure, but because I could tell her all about Trot. How I have blessed that dear child! She was never tired of hearing me talk of him. I spent all my evenings at her aunt's house—such a dear old lady, the aunt—talking about Trot, and a little about art and science, and literature, and my own small views and ambitions. What happy evenings they were!

'Well, Alex, I am too proud of her—too ashamed of my own unworthiness, to tell you much more. I can only say that God has been very good to me—that I am more blessed than ever I hoped to be—that if I had been born in the dear old fairy times which I have told Trot so much about that I have grown almost to believe in them myself—if I had been the special favourite of some omnipotent good fairy, and had had a talking bird, and Fortunatus's purse, and an invisible cap, and a flying carpet, and the princess with the golden locks for my bride, I could not have been one whit happier than I am, or more astonished at my own happiness.

'I am in such a state of surprise that I am doubtful of my own identity, and hardly feel sure

that I have any right to sign myself—your faithful friend, DICK PLOWDEN.'

Very happy are Alexis and his wife one sunny morning early in December, when Sibyl, leaning on her husband's arm, and with Trot at her side, makes her first round of the Cheswold domain.

The hoar-frost whitens the lawn and meadows; yet there are late roses still blooming on the wall. Alexis insists upon his wife seeing everything—hothouses, stables, piggeries even—and Sibyl inspects and admires rapturously enough to content an exacting lord of the manor.

'It is all lovely!' she exclaims; 'and what is best of all, the place suits you, Alex, and you suit the place to perfection. You seem to have been made for a country squire. How strange it is to know that Providence held *this* in store for you in that bitter time at Mrs. Bonny's! While I was waiting for a dead man's shoes, you, who never cringed to any man, or courted any inheritance, have been blest by Fortune.'

THE END.

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